ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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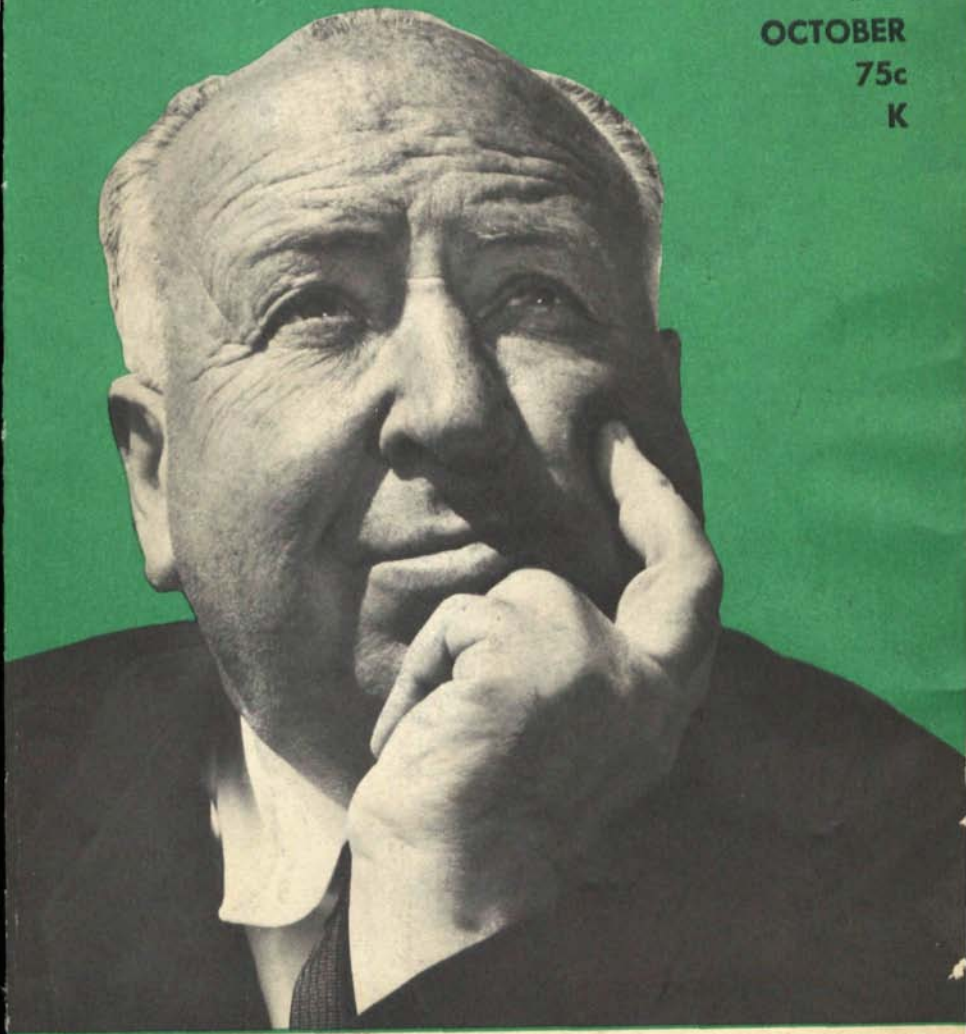

NEW stories presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

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October 1973

Dear Reader:

To better prepare yourself for the days of frost that lie ahead, you will find it most beneficial to break into this package of new, bone-chilling suspense. After you have recovered from that, there may be no need for an extra blanket to ward off mere climatic cold. On the other hand, you may require several, what with lingering memories of this month's lineup.

Be that as it may, you are sure to enjoy *The Room at the End of the Hall* by Helen Nielsen, followed by more such bizarre business and a leavening of humor, all of it capped by Frank Sisk's grim novelette, *The Case of Dr. Caxton.* I recommend them all.

If this happens to be your initiation into my selections of literary malice, you may be misled into thinking that you are hereafter insulated against anything. My regular readers have learned otherwise. There is always next month's issue.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 18, NO. 10 OCTOBER 1973

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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Perhaps it is true, after all, that by accepting the primary premise of spirits, one subconsciously lends himself to a shift "into the far side of time."

You must begin by accepting the premise that there really are spirits. David Cabell hadn't reached that state of mind when he took on the job of night clerk at the old Reardon Hotel, but he was of a sensitive and romantic nature and, therefore, capable of learning. Calvin Wyatt, to the contrary, was a cynic, and that was his downfall. Others, like Ara, the full-blooded Apache, who was the head maid at the hotel, never questioned the rumors of ghostly visitors who had long frequented

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the north wing of the third, and top, floor of the old building. On the night the two coeds from Tucson evacuated a room in panic, she accepted the situation like the stoic she was.

"It's always risky renting rooms in that wing," she said. "Especially this time of year."

The time she referred to was Pioneer Week, an annual promotion of the local Chamber of Commerce, planned to double the tourist trade with every lure from dancing in the town square to the rodeo and quarter-horse races at the fairgrounds. For the greater part of the year the Reardon Hotel, an establishment of sixty rooms, twenty baths, and the second-floor shower (where cowboys still came on a Saturday afternoon to pay one dollar for wash-up privileges before going out on the town), was the home of about twenty-five pensioners taking advantage of the low monthly rates, and a dozen or so students at the local junior college who were equally attracted by the economy factor. Occasionally a scholar of Americana, aware that the Reardon was one of the oldest big hotels in the territory, would check in long enough to imbibe an atmosphere unspoiled by commercialism. The management was frugal. Safety and health standards were meticulously observed, but modernization had ceased with the installation of electricity and plumbing fixtures of the Taft era. There was no air-conditioning, no swimming pool and no room service. The one elevator was a collector's item; even the blotter on the registration desk was bordered with advertisements of stable and harness shops long defunct. It was what the younger residents called a real funky place. The oldsters merely watched the television in the lobby and waited for time to pass.

David Cabell wasn't a student, although the black-rimmed glasses he wore for nearsightedness gave him a scholarly appearance. He was twenty-two years old, recently home from Vietnam, and had taken the low-paying job as an interim occupation while awaiting admission to the University of Arizona. During the first week of his employment he discovered, in a small storeroom behind the office, several dust-covered boxes containing the yellowed sheets of old registration books dating back to territorial days. An imaginative mind could conjure up an exciting past for the old relic of a hotel and lighten the ennui of a long night's desk duty, broken only by a routine hall check every two hours.

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There were two floors to check above the first floor, which consisted of the lobby, office, storerooms and a small independently operated cafe that had once been a saloon. For the most part this check consisted of searching the hall baths, the shower and any unlocked room for derelicts who sometimes came in through the fire-escape doors which must, by law, remain unlocked. Also, fire hoses were sometimes pulled off the mountings (an undergrad's macabre sense of humor), and a keen nose was required to sniff out smoke from any guest who might have dozed off while smoking a cigarette. The second floor check was routine, but even from the first night David sensed something strange about the north wing of the third floor. It wasn't the lighting, which was as garish as that of the other floors. It couldn't have been the sound of his footsteps—the shabby carpeting was identical throughout the building—but there were sounds. It might have been that the elevator groaned more when straining up to the higher level, and that the wind rattled the iron fire escapes more at that height.

After the first few nights it might even have been his imagination, stimulated by what he had learned from the old records. The north section of the hotel was the original building, and the third floor had been the deluxe section where men with important appendages to their names—"Senator," "Judge," "Doctor" or "Colonel"—had left their signatures upon the registration books. According to the floor plan, there were four suites with baths and four singles with lavatories on this corridor. The two best rooms, 327 and 329, had doors opening onto an open balcony where the city and mountain views were unsurpassed by any other rooms in the hotel. It was strange, therefore, that only one of the permanent guests lived in the north wing, and even stranger that, according to the records, no transient had been booked into a room on this corridor in almost a decade. It was as if the area were off limits for everyone except the one resident guest, whom David never saw, a Miss Melanie O'Farrell.

That was prior to Pioneer Week when the new manager, Charles Gerber, a hard-nosed businessman, lifted the unwritten ban on the north wing and put the two coeds from Tucson into room 328.

"I've checked it out with the other hotels," Gerber said. "Every year they turn away people that we could have for the taking. I'm

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not going to sit here with seven vacancies because of some old superstition that a ghost walks in the north wing. Just keep an eye on those fire doors, David. Keep out the hippies and we'll have no night visitors."

In retrospect, it seemed to David that Ara disapproved the policy change but, like all of her race, was loathe to show emotion before the White Eyes. Perfectly disciplined, the Apache conducted herself with the dignity of a lady whose homeland had fallen into the hands of a hostile power which she serenely knew would one day self-destruct.

David took a key from the row of pigeonhole boxes on the wall behind the desk and handed it to Ara—who promptly handed it back.

"This is for room 329," she said. "That room can't be rented."

David examined the key and saw his error. He replaced it with the key to 328, but Ara's comment aroused Gerber's attention.

"Why can't we rent 329?" he demanded.

"Because it's reserved for Miss O'Farrell," Ara said.

Gerber checked the board where all rooms and prices were listed. There were blue tags for monthly residents, pink tags for weekly residents and white tags for the day rates. There was no tag for 329—merely a notation: Do Not Rent This Room. Gerber pulled the blue tag for 327. "Melanie O'Farrell," he read aloud, "double with bath. Oh, I see, O'Farrell has a suite."

"No suite," Ara insisted. "She's holding one room."

"Holding? How long has she been holding it?"

Ara shrugged. "I don't know. I've only worked here fifteen years. Miss O'Farrell was here when I came. She lives in 327. Once a week I change the linens in 329, but it's never used. 'I'm holding it,' she says."

Gerber studied the plan and shook his head in disbelief. "It's the best room on the wing. Well, as long as she's paying for it, I guess she can hold it as long as she wants. Make up 328 for the college girls. Fifteen years! David, there really are some kooks in this hotel!"

Gerber was right about that. The permanents included every phase of near-senility, from the quaintly fey to Major Randolph whose night dreams sometimes exploded into wild battle cries. In the younger set was one Calvin Wyatt, student, who had traded his sports car for a station wagon because he could keep a full-size bed available at all times behind

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the front seat. Calvin had splurged on a red silk shirt and boots to wear during Pioneer Week, when anyone caught without some vestige of Western attire could be hustled off to the local jail. He had the room next to the one Gerber reserved for the night clerk, and David knew that plenty of action went on in that room as well as in the station wagon. Husky and swarthy as an Indian, Calvin was attractive to the ladies, and David, who could afford only a string tie and a silver belt buckle for his gesture to local custom, envied him the knack. Another resident was old Mr. Clancy, a retired miner, who still toiled over mysterious maps and brought strange-looking packages to his room, which unnerved some guests lest they be chemicals that might blow up the hotel. Both Clancy and Calvin were within earshot of the desk when Gerber made his decision that dispatched Ara to the north wing. Clancy was at the soft drink machine. He drank at least six bottles every day because, he said, it eased the gas on his stomach. Bottle in hand, he approached the desk as Gerber hurried off to other duties.

"That Ara," he said, shaking his head knowingly, "she knows more than she tells. She knows about Melanie O'Farrell."

Clancy waited until David asked, "What does she know?"

"Well, that she wasn't always called *Miss* O'Farrell, for one thing. She was called a lot of other things—especially by the church ladies on the hill. Melanie—that's what she was called professionally."

"Professionally?" David echoed.

"Melanie had the finest stable of girls west of St. Louis!"

Calvin brightened eagerly. "Do you mean call girls?"

Casey nodded. "A dying art," he said sadly. "Nowadays, the trade's overrun with scabs. Miss Melanie was a real pro. She started in the cribs. Then, when the fort was enlarged and business got more brisk, she built a house of her own. Finest house in that end of town. You can still see it, but it's a place for roomers now. It's these deterioratin' values, Nothin' is quality anymore. Melanie, now, was quality. She brought out a piana from Chicago and built a stage in the front parlor. Had live entertainers from San Francisco—even New York. You might go so far as to say she was the cultural director of the territory. Leastways, hers was the only house in town that didn't smell of liniment and beans."

"Where did she come from originally?" David asked.

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"Don't rightly know. Some used to say Denver, some New Orleans. I figured it was from someplace in the South because that's where Blackman came from."

"Brett Blackman—the outlaw?"

Clancy beamed his appreciation of an attentive audience. "That's right. Melanie was Brett Blackman's girl—before she worked the cribs or ran the big house. She was his girl when he and his gang robbed a gold shipment practically off the steps of the Denver mint. Fifty thousand dollars in new twenty-dollar gold pieces, and they would have got clean away if a little rat named Sanders hadn't informed, to save his own hide. The law picked off the gang one by one—there was three of them, includin' Sanders. Finally, a couple of months after the robbery, they got Blackman in an ambush. Shot him right out of the saddle as he was ridin' hell-bent for leather toward this very town. Never did find his share of the gold. Twenty-five thousand dollars and they never found a dollar of it! When Melanie built the house about three years later there was talk that she'd gotten the money, but I figure she made it like anybody makes it—hustlin'." Clancy cackled at his own wit. "That's the only way to make it—hustlin'—one way or the other."

"If she made so much money," Calvin challenged, "where is it now? A rich woman wouldn't live in a dump like this."

Skepticism pained Clancy. "Oh, she made it, all right," he insisted. "Only one thing goes faster than money, son, and that's time. And maybe Melanie don't see the Reardon with the same eyes as you. Maybe she sees it like it was when the carpets were thick and red, and there was a big crystal chandelier hangin' in the lobby. Why, there used to be a big paintin' up in the third floor corridor of a lady wearin' nothin' but a red rose behind her ear! It was a fine place in the old days."

Already, David's imagination was beginning to form pictures of the past glory. "Does Miss O'Farrell ever come out of her room?" he asked.

"Scarcely," Clancy said. "Mostly, she just stays up there with her memories, I reckon. Sends out for her meals. I've even known her to hire a car and go for drives in the country a whole day at a time—but not lately. Guess she's content. Sooner or later, no matter how hot the blood's flowed, a body gets content. Not the mind—the body. Now, David, you better take this old windbag up to his room or I'll talk all night." Clancy belched

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loudly and placed the empty bottle on a stand beside the dispenser. "Sure relieves the gas," he said.

That was the last night Melanie O'Farrell had the north wing to herself, and the first night David saw the ghost.

It was almost midnight before David made the first hall check. He covered the second floor and then took the grinding old elevator up to the third. Last of all, he approached the north wing. It might have been the result of Clancy's tale, but something made every sound magnified. The air seemed warmer, too—almost balmy—and with a tantalizing scent in the air. Was it magnolias? Orange blossoms? Something muskier, he decided. He found a window and struggled with the catch but it was stuck tight. He reached the corridor leading to Melanie's room just as the bulb in a no-longer elegant ceiling fixture sputtered and burned out. Now the corridor was lighted only by the neon glow of the night sky reflected on the small panes of the balcony door. The light moved as the door opened inward and a woman stepped in through the doorway.

She was small and slender. Folds of sweeping chiffon couldn't conceal the beauty of her body. Her face was shadowed, but the light silvered her hair. She might have been an apparition until, seeing David immobilized at the far end of the corridor, she spoke. "I'm sorry if I frightened you," she said. "I just stepped outside for a moment. I thought I heard someone coming down the street."

Her voice was soft and surprisingly warm. David recovered his equilibrium and said, "There's likely to be a lot of night traffic this week. It's the pioneer celebration."

"Is it really that time again?" There was a touch of weariness in her tone. "That means we'll have that noisy parade. Perhaps those were the horses I heard."

David still hadn't moved.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked.

He had to answer, and he couldn't tell Melanie O'Farrell that he thought she was a ghost. "The ceiling light burned out," he said.

"I hadn't noticed. You needn't replace it on my account, Mr. Cabell. I'm going straight to bed now."

Fluttering one hand in a gesture of dismissal, Melanie O'Farrell opened the door of 327 and stepped into her room. The door closed and only a teasing fragrance remained outside in the

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hall. David turned uneasily away.

"Brett Blackman, 1873 to 1906. Believed to have been the son of a prominent Southern family whose fortunes were lost in the War between the States. Blackman had a brief but colorful career as the

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leader of the Blackman gang which terrorized banks and railroads at the turn of the century."

Calvin read slowly, tracing one finger under the words in the book. Above the words was a faded photograph of a fairly handsome man with a thick black moustache sweeping sorrowfully toward his chin and shaggy black eyebrows balancing the brim of a dark Stetson. David took the book from Calvin's hand and studied the likeness of Brett Blackman more closely.

"He looks more sad than mean," he declared.

"But Clancy was right about the Denver mint robbery," Calvin said. "It's all in the book—even the part about nobody ever having recovered Blackman's share of the heist."

"It wasn't called a heist in 1906."

"Don't split hairs. You should appreciate the fact that I am uncharacteristically cracking a book instead of chasing chicks."

It was true that Clancy's gossip had a strange effect on Calvin. Armed with a stack of library books, he invaded David's domain behind the desk the following evening. Each one contained a bit of the legend of Brett Blackman. One, which Calvin now proffered, had a photograph of a young woman standing on the porch of an impressive Victorian mansion with only the smiling portion of her face visible under the shadow of the roof overhang.

"Well?" Calvin asked.

David squinted at the pictures. "I can't be sure from this. The woman's dressed differently—and she's sixty-five years older than the woman I saw in the hall last night. If I really did see a woman."

"*If* you saw a woman! You told me that you finally saw Melanie O'Farrell last night."

"I guess I did. It was dark and kind of spooky."

"*Spooked,* you mean. You were spooked on old Clancy's story. I've got a theory about the haunt in the north wing—and all the pensioners in the hotel swear by it. I think the whole thing's the work of the Indian maid, Ara."

"Indian medicine?"

"No, I don't believe in Indian spooks any more than any other kind. But I've noticed that the service room, where all the linens and cleaning stuff are kept, is way down in our end of the second floor, and that's about as far from the north wing as you can get. The Apache's no fool. She makes up those stories herself to save all those footsteps going up to clean the rooms."

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"You must be sick!" David said.

"Maybe—but there's nothing wrong with my vibrations. Oh, wow, look at that and look at those!"

Calvin snapped the book shut and leered openly as the two coeds, who had checked in earlier in the day, pranced in through the street doorway. They were rigged out for the festivities in the tightest of Western shirts and jeans. One had honey-blonde hair to her shoulders, the other had a cap of brown curls, and both had the latest in rotary mobile power.

"They can haunt my corridor any day," Calvin said. He was all smiles when the girls approached the desk, but it was David who grabbed the key from the box and followed them into the elevator.

"I'm the operator here," he said. "Going up, ladies?" He managed to close the door before Calvin could join them.

"If any of the guests in this hotel bother you," he said, as the elevator ground upward, "let me know."

"I think he was cute," the dark-haired girl said.

"I think the elevator man is cute," remarked the blonde. "What do they call you, elevator man?"

"Mostly 'Hey, you.' "

"I heard someone in the lobby call you David," she told him.

"That was probably Goliath."

With such brilliant repartee, the girls were shrieking with laughter when the elevator reached the third floor. They had spent some time at the old Crystal Palace bar at the square and caught the holiday contagion. Explaining that there was no light in the hall, David offered to walk them to their room but the first floor buzzer began to nag and they produced a pencil-flash to prove they were prepared for minor emergencies. They certainly weren't afraid of the dark, or of anything else within reason.

Ghosts were not within reason.

It was four hours before David saw the girls again. He was making his rounds on the second floor, directly under the stairway to the north wing, when they came screaming down the stairs wearing near-transparent nightwear and panicked expressions. Babbling with fright, they told an eerie tale of someone, or something, that had opened the locked door to their room and stood watching while they slept.

"Something in white!" cried the honey-blonde.

"That smelled of perfume!" the dark one insisted.

By the time Gerber, whose apartment was adjacent to the

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stairway, reached the scene, doors were opening all along the second-floor corridor. There was no way of getting the girls back to that room and the only room vacant on the lower floor was the one David used. It had no bath—only a lavatory—and was located next to the noisy fire-escape door, but they accepted his offer without question. He gave them the key and went on upstairs with Gerber to inspect the hastily vacated room. They had left the lights blazing but all was quiet. Gerber tried the key in their door. It had been years since these locks were used and Gerber's grip was strong. There was the sound of breaking metal and a piece of the lock clattered to the floor.

"I'll get a locksmith up here tomorrow," Gerber said. "You can see for yourself, there's nothing wrong with this room. Nightmares—that's all it was."

"There were two of them," David protested.

"At that age, nightmares are contagious," Gerber said. "I'll take their suitcases down. You finish your hall check."

David stepped out onto the balcony from which Melanie O'Farrell had come the previous evening. It was four feet wide and had a wooden railing extending its full length. Three doors opened onto the balcony—the one from 327, the one to the hall through which Melanie O'Farrell had come the previous night, and the one leading to the long-reserved 329. Draped from inside, no light showed at the third door. He tried the knob and found the hardware so rusted from disuse that the knob wouldn't turn. Retracing his steps, David locked the balcony door, then stepped back into the hall, closing the door behind him. There was no light at the transom of Miss O'Farrell's room, which seemed strange after all the noise the girls had made in exiting. There was no light at all except from the balcony door. The air seemed heavier in the hall. A great flush of warmth came over him, and then he could smell the perfume again—strong and musky. Compulsively, he ran back to the lighted corridor at the head of the stairway. There he paused as the sound of laughter welled up from the darkness behind him—a woman's laughter, low and teasing—but it was the sound of the spirited tinkling of a piano that sent him racing down the stairs.

David made no more hall checks that night. He sat it out with his chair backed against the key boxes and his eyes fixed on the brightly-lighted lobby. He watched three old films on the

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television set, and was engrossed with the test pattern when his relief came on duty.

Off duty, he went to sleep on a couch in the storeroom. It was midmorning when he awakened. Because the storeroom had no windows, the door had been left open into the office, and whoever was on duty must have taken someone up in the elevator because there was no one at the desk. Something like a shadow standing before the reservation board caught David's eye. He stepped to the doorway and the shadow turned quickly. It was a woman in full Pioneer Week regalia: dressed all in black, tight bodice, long flowing skirt and a wide black hat. Tiny, black-gloved hands grasped the long handle of a black parasol that was used as a cane. The body could have been that of a girl, but the hair piled high under the hat was silvery-white, and the still lovely face was webbed with lines. The sable-brown eyes still sparkled with vitality. Embarrassed at being caught on the wrong side of the desk, she edged toward the key box on the opposite wall.

"I thought I saw something in my box," she said, "and there was no one behind the desk."

The voice was that of the woman David had encountered in the third-wing corridor—Melanie O'Farrell. It could be no other.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," David said. "I was asleep in the storeroom. Did you hear the noise in the hall outside your room last night?"

He watched her face for reaction. She cleverly turned her head. "No," she answered. "I heard nothing last night. I took a sleeping pill before I went to bed."

"The guests across the hall from you thought someone broke into their room. They were terrified."

"I shouldn't wonder. Well, since there's no mail, Mr. Cabell, I shall go for my annual promenade around the square and see what nonsense the city fathers have come up with this year." A fey smile played at the corners of her generous mouth. Still using the parasol as a cane, she straightened her back and stepped forward smartly. "If I don't break my neck on these fool heels," she added ruefully. "I only wear them during Pioneer Week. At least they're authentic."

"You look lovely, Miss O'Farrell," David said.

She dazzled him with a full smile that wiped fifty years from her face, and swept magnificently across the lobby.

Later, David met Calvin in the coffee shop and told him of his

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meeting with Melanie O'Farrell. "She's beautiful!" he said. "You wouldn't believe a lady who must be eighty, at least, could be so beautiful. And I mean *lady*. She can't be the Melanie in the book."

"Why not?" Calvin challenged. "Nobody said Melanie wasn't a lady. You heard what Clancy said—she brought culture to the town."

"Did you hear about the girls moving out of 328 last night?"

Calvin grinned over his coffee cup. "Every weird detail—and it's great! They're next door to me now. And don't accuse me of spooking them last night, even if it does sound like a fun idea."

"We can't blame Ara. She wasn't even in the hotel."

Calvin grew thoughtful. "That's right, she wasn't. Maybe it was old Clancy."

"Motivation?"

"At that age, who needs motivation? Anything to break the monotony. Besides, the girls could have been dropping pills and had a bummer."

"Maybe."

"You're really bugged about that north wing, aren't you?"

"Forget it," David said.

"Okay, I'll change the subject. I found another book on Blackman and it tells what happened to the stoolie who sold out to the law. Three years after Blackman's death, Sanders was found dead in a Nogales hotel with a .22 slug in his forehead. That's a woman's gun."

"Gamblers used them. They were called sleeve guns."

"But look at the possibilities! Sanders caused Blackman's death, and Melanie was Blackman's girl. The gold disappears. Melanie works in the cribs—figuring Sanders will turn up someday. Through the grapevine, every strata of society has one, she learns where he is and hits the trail. Sanders dies. Melanie builds a big house."

David cried, "Now you're making out she's a murderess! How venal can you get?"

Calvin sipped his coffee thoughtfully. "Life," he said, "is very venal. Anyway, for your sake, because you're obviously a romantic soul, let's say she killed him for revenge and built the house with the crib profits. That still leaves $25,000 in twenty-dollar gold pieces unaccounted for. Do you realize what they would be worth today? Many times the value!"

"Calvin," David said, "forget about the gold. That was sixty-five years ago."

True to Gerber's expectations, the old hotel was filled to capac-

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ity by noon. When the Grand Parade started at two o'clock, Major Randolph appeared in full uniform to ride with the cavalry veterans, and Mr. Clancy, in miner's garb, marched with a pack mule laden with chilled drinks, drinking and belching all the way.

Caught up in the spirit of the celebration, David never did finish his sleep. Once he caught a glimpse of Calvin carrying a six-pack of beer into the coeds' room. He still had the book in his pocket but it was obvious that he was imbibing more freely of the beer.

David snatched his evening meal from a vendor at the park, where the marching bands had been replaced with an electric rock group and people of all ages were dancing in the street. When it was time for his shift to begin, he returned to the hotel and was surprised to find Miss O'Farrell standing at the same place behind the registration desk where he had found her earlier in the day.

"Miss O'Farrell," he scolded gently, "there's no mail until tomorrow."

Startled, she grasped the desk top for support. "Oh, I must be confused," she said. "It's been a long day. I'm a little tired."

He offered to take her up to her room, and she accepted eagerly. Once the elevator was in motion, she seemed to regain vitality.

"There was a gallant Captain Cabell stationed at Camp Verde when I was young," she said. "Was he kin of yours?"

"I doubt it, ma'am. My people were teachers, mostly."

"Oh, dear! Still, there is a resemblance." She reached out and caressed his cheek with one hand. "The captain wore a fine beard. You would look handsome with a beard, Mr. Cabell. I'm so pleased that men are wearing them again. There's nothing more pleasing to the eye than a splendid young man with a beard."

David was on the verge of asking her if she really was the Melanie of Calvin's books, but the elevator reached the third floor, the doors opened, and Miss O'Farrell, as if rejuvenated, stepped out smartly before he could even offer his arm in support. When the tip of the closed parasol caught in the worn carpet, she pouted.

"It was so much nicer when the carpets were red," she said, "and when there were gay paintings on the walls. It's all so shabby now."

Then the illusion took over. Before David's eyes, Melanie O'Farrell was young again. Her hair was black, her eyes were

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flashing and the long skirts swished invitingly as she pranced down the red-carpeted corridor toward her room. From the wide staircase came the laughter of women and their gentlemen of the evening as they eagerly mounted the stairs to the north wing. The mystery was no longer a mystery. Carriages from Melanie's house must have brought her most talented girls to entertain the powerful men of the territory. The scent of their mingled perfumes filled the suddenly warm air, and from somewhere came the sound of a piano. It was as if David had penetrated a shim into the far side of time, and the strangest thing was how very natural it all seemed.

He returned to the lobby and spent the next few hours taking guests up to their rooms. He told no one of what he had seen.

It was many hours later, after the lobby was empty and David was making himself a cup of coffee in the office percolator, that he became aware of a man standing in front of the desk. He was at least six feet tall. His eyes were shadowed by the wide brim of a dusty black hat, but a black moustache accentuated the long line of his face, and sideburns reached almost to the edge of his collar. He wore frontier dress: a long black coat, string tie and a brocade vest. For all his size, he gave the impression of great weariness. Placing a small package wrapped in brown paper on top of the desk, he began to drum the counter with gloved fingers.

"I'm sorry," David said, "we don't have a vacant room tonight."

"I have a reservation," the man insisted. "B. Black of Denver—"

"I don't see how that's possible."

"Well, look, sonny. Look."

It was impossible not to obey. David searched the reservation board, where every room was tagged, and noticed a white slip showing at room 329. On it was written: B. Black.

"Oh, no," David groaned, "Gerber couldn't have sold that room!"

The man didn't wait for confirmation. He had already stepped into the elevator. It was irregular, but he could register in the morning. Catching sight of the package on the desk, David scooped it up on his way into the elevator.

"You were forgetting your package," he said.

Black grabbed the parcel. "That wouldn't do. It's for my wife." He opened his coat to take a coin from his pocket and David noticed that he wore a pair of long-barreled pistols in a black leather

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gun belt strapped around his hips.

"Hey, those are beauties!" he said. "Peacemakers, aren't they? They sure do make realistic replicas of those old guns!"

Black closed his coat and dropped the coin into David's hand as the elevator doors opened at the third floor.

"I'm obliged," he said.

"Your room is at the very end of the corridor—"

"I know where my room is, sonny."

As Black stalked down the corridor, David realized that he wore high Texas-style boots and drop-shank spurs that made no sound when he walked. Before he could try to understand this, the elevator buzzer drew his attention to the indicator. He was wanted on the second floor. He closed the doors and started down.

Gerber waited at the second level, bouncing with anger. "I told you to watch that fire door!" he screamed. "Do you know what those girls in your room are doing? Every young buck in town's been traipsing in and out of that room! They've got beer and reefers and different-colored pills. I've called the police."

In the hall behind Gerber, doors were opening one by one. He stopped shouting and hustled David back to the room next to the fire escape where the girls, one dazed and one nearly hysterical, were being comforted by three young men.

"It was Calvin Wyatt's fault," the noisy one sobbed. "We were having a nice little party—everybody cool—and then Calvin dropped something that made him wild. He jumped up and yelled: 'I've got it! I know why that old lady spooks the north wing! She's got the gold hidden in that room!' "

"Calvin said that?" David asked.

"That's what he said. Then he couldn't get the door open—it was stuck—so he kicked it open and ran out, yelling something about the spooks protecting all that gold. He's crazy, man!"

"Where is he now?"

"Who knows? The last we saw of him he was climbing up the fire escape to the roof!"

"Oh, no!" David groaned. "He can't go into that room now!"

He shoved Gerber aside and ran back to the elevator. The first floor buzzer was signaling—probably the police—but he had no time for them. Calvin was high and on his way over the roof to drop down on the balcony outside room 329, and the room was occupied. David ran the elevator up to the third floor and was racing

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toward the north wing when the sound of a gunshot exploded from somewhere in the front of the building. He stopped, listening. There was no further sound but, suddenly, the corridor that had once been warm and fragrant became dank and chill. He walked slowly to the balcony door and opened it. It was there that he found Calvin Wyatt's body.

He had fallen back against the stucco wall, his legs spread-eagled and a look of stark terror in his eyes. One hand clutched at the front of his shirt. David knelt beside the body and pulled the hand away. There was a round hole burned through the shirting, but there was no blood. The doctor who arrived later explained that Calvin had died of a heart attack. The pills, the sprint up the fire escape and over the roof, the drop down to the balcony, any one of these, he claimed, could have killed him. Guests in the room vacated by the girls admitted to hearing someone on the balcony, but denied hearing a gunshot. What David heard was shrugged off as an auto backfiring in the street. A cigarette stub found on the balcony accounted for the burned hole on Calvin's shirt.

Only David knew otherwise. During the excitement that followed the discovery of Calvin's body, two doors remained closed: the doors leading to Melanie O'Farrell's room and the room reserved for B. Black. It was daylight before the balcony was cleared and David could make his own search. He found no bullet hole or shell casing, but there were chips of paint at the threshold of the balcony door that led into room 329, and the knob that had been rusted shut turned easily in David's hand. He opened the door and stepped inside the long-unused room. The draperies were drawn but daylight from the balcony doorway was enough to show that someone was in the bed.

"It's all right to go in now," Ara remarked at his shoulder.

She had come silently with fresh linens on her arm. She brushed past David and opened the draperies, and they could see then that it was Melanie O'Farrell in the bed. A gentle smile softened her face and one arm was thrown out across the empty space beside her as if in a loving embrace. David felt for her pulse. She was dead. There was something more. The sheet on the empty side of the bed was wrinkled, as if it had been recently occupied, and the pillow still bore an indentation from the weight of a head. David picked

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up one long black hair from the pillow.

He telephoned the desk from Miss O'Farrell's room, and there he found the brown wrapping paper in a wastebasket and the bottle of perfume on the dresser. The musky scent was everywhere. When he returned to the other room, Ara had smoothed out the sheets and was putting a fresh case on the pillow.

"It will be all right to rent these rooms now," she said.

Nobody thought it strange that Melanie O'Farrell had died in her sleep. She was a very old lady, and if she chose not to die in her own bed that was her business. Some would say that she had reserved the room all these years for that purpose. David told no one about her visitor. There was no registration card for B. Black, and he knew that it was Melanie, not Gerber, who had placed the reservation slip in 329. Everything fell into place when he searched the old registration books for the night Brett Blackman was killed. Two rooms had been reserved for Mr. and Mrs. B. Black of Denver. The rooms were 327 and 329. Mrs. Black's signature was on the registry—Mr. Black never checked in.

No gold was found in either of Melanie O'Farrell's rooms; but David, who was learning to keep silent about some things, like Ara, could appreciate Calvin's terror when he wrenched open the door to the room at the end of the hall and was met by the blazing Peacemaker in the hand of a gunman who had waited sixty-five years to complete a rendezvous. There are times when even a ghost needs privacy.

Later, David took breakfast in the coffee shop and left a tip for the waitress.

"Hey," she called out as he was leaving, "you've got to be kidding! The service wasn't that good!"

David hastily replaced the coin Black had given him with a quarter. He just wasn't up to explaining how he came by a twenty-dollar gold piece—Denver minting, 1906.

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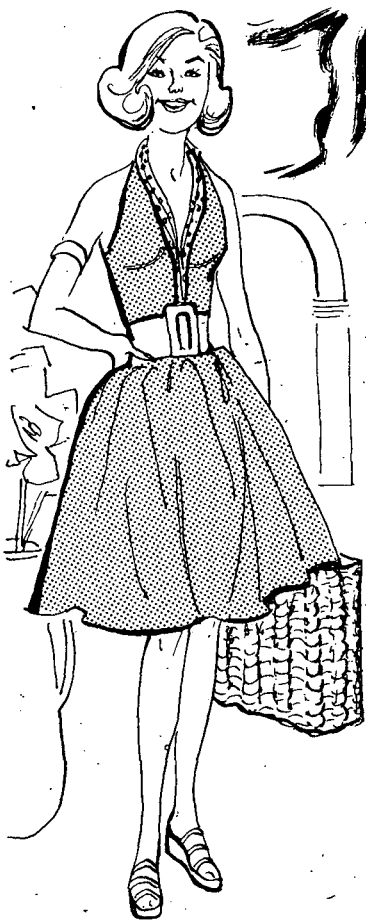
Trying to appease the forces of retribution may have its pitfalls.



They Sent You

BY Donald Olson

Pio came into the garden of the villa, situated just south of Acapulco, and handed his master a card. It was one of those blue-gold days which Richard had not yet learned were the rule, rather than the rarity.

He had married for money and murdered his wife. After liquidating her considerable holdings he had left Wisconsin, not out of any fear that his crime would be discovered, for he had planned Catherine's death too well for

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that, but because Wisconsin put demands upon his conscience that threatened to make life uncomfortable. Besides, he'd always wanted to travel.

First he went to Italy, which in his dreams had been the ideal setting for his new life: Venice, and an ancient palazzo on a backwater canal. (He had read *The Aspern Papers*.) Yet somehow the real Venice, though charming, did not match the image. He found it noisy, smelly, ineluctably foreign.

Mexico, which he tried next, was better—perhaps because it was seen fresh, rather than filtered through the romantic imagination of some bygone artist. Or it may have been that he half expected to be disappointed and hence was not, despite a series of minor annoyances that seemed designed by fate to prejudice him against that country as well.

The airport had mislaid one of his bags; a flunky had been needlessly officious about his passport; at the hotel the air-conditioner in his room didn't work and there had been a tiresome misunderstanding when he tried to complain to the manager on the phone. Then, as he'd stepped into the corridor on his way to dinner, the door across from his had burst open, releasing a torrent of Latin-American music, and a half-dressed woman had flung herself upon him, jabbering in Spanish, which he couldn't have understood even if the music hadn't deafened him; a man had come after her, laughing, pulling her off Richard, while inside the room he'd glimpsed another man who looked as if he'd had too many tequilas. Richard had stayed out till midnight, vowing to change hotels if the party were still going on when he got back. All was quiet, however—but the air-conditioner still didn't work. He had left at first dawn for Acapulco.

It was the difference between purgatory and paradise. The landscape was magnificent and the villa perfect—and how safe he felt! The adobe wall facing the road was over a foot thick, ablaze with bougainvillea, or was it hibiscus? He was no more botanically hip than linguistically, but it didn't matter. The flowers were just as lovely for his not knowing their names, and the servants spoke English. When he sat in the terraced garden the view of the sea was infinitely reassuring, offering both protection and escape, should the need arise. A small yacht, more serviceable than grandiose, rode snugly in the cove below him. At times, when the sultry haze of boredom made him restless, he would look down at

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the yacht and secretly hope he might have to use it as a vessel of escape.

To the south the coast looked as wild and lifeless as Crusoe's beach; to the north he could see the red-tiled roof of the neighboring villa which was occupied, so Pio informed him, by an American poetess and her companion. Richard was pleased with his servants. Pio was efficient, never insolent, yet cheeky enough to be amusing. Margarita, on the other hand, was sober as a corpse, with eyes like spigots never entirely turned off. Richard suspected a tragic background, but didn't pry. One of the chief pleasures of life, he had learned, was to satisfy only enough of one's curiosity about others to provide a groundwork for speculation. Or perhaps he subconsciously felt that the less he knew about others the less they would discover about him.

He examined the card as if it were some relic Pio had found in a dusty cabinet: *Fiesta Fabrics. Mexico City, Acapulco, Palm Beach, New York.* In the corner was a name: *Caryl Dane.*

He'd had no visitors since leasing the villa; had wanted none. If not a burning flame, his conscience was by no means a cold cinder. A life of excess, which he could now afford, would have disgusted him. Men like Richard, with conventional upbringings, might laugh at religion, violate ethical principles, and scoff at superstition, but their souls are not easily orphaned, and Richard had some vague idea of appeasing the forces of retribution by practicing certain mild austerities while leading a life of comfortable but nonetheless solitary confinement. It was as if he'd made a deal with God: forgive my crime and I'll live like a hermit the rest of my life.

He held the delicately scented card to his nostrils. For a moment he was about to refuse to see the woman.

"What does she look like, Pio?"

Pio's lips parted to form a graphic smile of appreciation, but Richard stopped him before he could speak. "No. Don't tell me."

Yet that budding smile had been a clue, so that her extraordinary beauty did not come as a total surprise. Tall and shapely, she had the clearest of blue eyes, a broad, honey-toned face in a wreath of pale blonde hair. The straw bag she carried could have been her sample case—it was big enough. Her smile dazzled him.

"Well, Richard, you don't remember me at all, do you?"

He didn't; an inexcusable affront to such a beauty. Struggling to place her, he said, "We've met,

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I'm sure, but I can't recall where."

"I'm not sure where myself," she admitted. "So long ago. Party, or reunion, or something. I went to school with Catherine."

His smile covered the nasty impact of his wife's name.

She said she had seen his name on the hotel register in Mexico City. He had evidently just checked out as she'd come in. "They told me you were coming here, so I tracked you down. Is Catherine with you?"

In Eau Claire, or Miami, or L.A., anywhere in the States, he would have felt a spasm of fear. In this place, with the wall on his left and the sea below him, he felt effectually guarded from any intrusion of the past, no matter how threatening. When he said, "Catherine's dead," he even smiled, conveying the full story: *Catherine's a memory, not a scar.*

Her condolences were equally casual; she admitted she hadn't known Catherine well. He offered her a drink. She talked about herself. She'd first come to Mexico to get a divorce, had liked the country and taken a job with a small textile company. It had grown and she was now an important part of it, traveling between the branches. She'd just come from Mexico City; she would be flying to Palm Beach at the end of the week. She told him she had not remarried.

He found her soothingly agreeable and breathed an inward sigh of regret. He would not cultivate her acquaintance.

"Nothing," he told her when she asked him what he meant to do with his time now that he was settled. *"Dolce far niente,* as the Italians say. Blissful idleness." Which I've earned, he might have added, after twelve years of Catherine telling him to do this, do that; come here, go there; sit down, shut up. He'd earned it, yes, with interest.

"Oh, but you're much too young to retire," she said, laughing. Her teeth were flawless. "Maybe I could recruit you for Fiesta."

"I don't know anything about textiles," he said. "I don't even know what your dress is made of. Or what you'd call that color."

"Linen. *Couleur de rose.*"

"Sounds more French than Mexican."

"I sell Mexican fabrics so I can wear French fashions." She looked around. "But I don't mean as a salesman or anything technical. Public relations, perhaps. Very important, you know, in an international setup. You could work right here. Take visiting V.I.P.'s for boat rides. Give them drinks. Seriously, if you *were* at all in-

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clined . . ." She didn't press the issue, yet didn't quite dismiss it.

"I'd be a rotten risk," he said. "Who knows, I may decide Mexico's not for me after all."

"Then go quickly. It casts a spell not easily broken." She added something in Spanish. He looked blankly inquisitive.

"You don't speak the language?" she asked.

"I've got a teacher who comes down two or three times a week. Next time I may surprise you."

"Is that an invitation?"

It hadn't been, and had there been even a shade of coquetry in her voice he wouldn't have hesitated to make that clear. As there wasn't, he told her she would be most welcome at any time, quite sure there was no danger of her coming back.

"In the meantime," she said, this time with a frankly cajoling note, "do think about it. Fiesta, I mean."

He said he would, though of course he wouldn't. The reason would have astonished her. Few would be able to appreciate his abstract idea of punishment. They would see the opulence of his way of life, the comfortable trappings, but would be blind to the bars surrounding it all. They wouldn't understand that he was too sophisticated a sinner to be fooled by hair shirts and hysterics and all the other tricks that purge but seldom punish, tricks that may have worked for the medieval offender but not for a modern sinner like Richard, who had been taught that pain is perversion and perversion is pleasure.

He said good-bye to Caryl Dane at the gate. When she had driven away in her convertible he walked slowly back to the villa, a slight frown cording his forehead. He lifted his hand and rubbed it smooth, yet the thought behind it remained. He had no real cause for doubt, except that she was American and had known Catherine—or said she had. He was almost positive he had never met her; surely he would have remembered. Also, if her own link with Catherine had been so slight, why had she gone to the trouble of looking him up?

Inside, he went to the telephone and called the number on Caryl Dane's card. A man answered, "Fiesta Fabrics." Richard asked for Miss Dane.

"She's not in at the moment. Who's calling, please?"

"It's not important."

As he hung up he noticed Pio behind him. The servants were as noiseless as they were efficient. Ordinarily this pleased him. Now he was irritated.

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"What is it?" he asked sharply. Pio was not dumb. He would surely wonder why his employer was trying to call the visitor who had just left his house.

"Sorry, señor. You wished to be driven into town at three?"

"I've changed my mind. I'll go tomorrow."

Her credentials, he knew, could be valid, yet that would be no guarantee she wasn't also an undercover agent for the American police authorities. Would the police use such devious means if they had actually found anything irregular? For that matter, what could they find? His crime had been foolproof, meticulously planned, perfectly executed. No, there was nothing to worry about. It was merely that he craved some element of danger, and a touch of anxiety added harshness to the penance he had imposed upon himself.

He decided to work harder on his Spanish. The teacher he had engaged, Ramon Sanchez, had written Richard a very proper letter with a note of urgent supplication between the lines. Richard was amazed at how readily everything he needed was made available. He supposed the merest rumor of a wealthy person leasing a villa set off a scramble among domestics and others with some service to offer. Pio and Margarita were actually on the doorstep when he arrived, and once he had interviewed Sanchez he saw no reason not to engage him. In his youth the man had played small roles in Mexican films and had also had a hopeless fling in Hollywood under the aegis of a rich Burbank widow. Since then he had survived precariously on the edges of show business. His looks had faded, but it was his voice, so admirably attuned to the musical cadences of the Spanish tongue, that had won Richard's confidence.

When Ramon Sanchez came at the appointed hour on the following day he looked almost as tearful as Margarita. He told Richard that he was being tossed out of his lodging house for paying his addresses to the landlord's wife. Also, he had lost all his ready money at a gambling casino. He had no choice but to flee to his sister's house in Veracruz. Unless . . .

This was too annoying for words. Richard didn't want to have to find another teacher. He was getting on well with Ramon, and though he knew it was cheating on his agreement with his conscience, he offered to let Ramon stay at the villa temporarily. It would be helpful to have him

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always at hand. In a month Richard thought he would be speaking the language like a native.

It was a pleasing arrangement. Richard felt less lonely with Ramon in the house; he could treat him with more familiarity than he could a servant, while Ramon, being an employee, was properly deferential. The lessons progressed favorably.

Two weeks later Richard called Caryl Dane. He was told she was in New York. He left his name.

When she returned his call a week later he invited her to lunch at the villa. "To show off my Spanish," he explained.

His actual purpose was quite different.

Because he didn't wish to be alone with her, he asked Ramon to join them. The ex-actor was glib and not unamusing, and it would put Miss Dane on notice that Richard had not arranged the luncheon party to enjoy her company alone.

Everything went well. Ramon seemed obviously smitten by Caryl Dane's beauty—Richard intercepted several languishing glances. Caryl Dane was impressed with Richard's progress; they managed a simple conversational rally without resorting to English although, when she rattled off a sentence too rapidly, he could only shake his head in unquestionable despair.

Richard suggested they have their coffee in the smaller sitting room. When they were seated, he casually picked up a picture on a nearby table, a picture he had placed there only that morning. "It was taken a week before Catherine died," he said, handing it to Caryl Dane. Which was true, it had been; but the woman standing next to him in the picture was his sister Willa, who bore absolutely no resemblance to Catherine.

Caryl Dane gazed for a moment at the picture. Then she said, "She was always a pretty girl. She hadn't changed a bit since I knew her. Poor Catherine."

Richard's hand trembled ever so slightly as he took the picture from her and set it back on the table.

When they were saying goodbye at the gate Caryl Dane looked at Richard with an impishly teasing smile. "Is it always your habit to have a referee present when you entertain a woman?"

"I thought he would amuse you."

"Are you afraid of women, Richard?"

"Women are often dangerous. Especially beautiful women."

"You flatter me."

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...u beautiful—or ...re ... turned to get ...ave you thought about Fiesta?"

"Were you serious?"

"I'm always serious. Next time we must be alone, Richard. For a proper tête-à-tête."

Back in the villa Ramon grew lyrical with admiration. "But beware, Señor Richard. She is out to get you."

The phrase jarred Richard. "To get me?"

Ramon smiled. He was proud of his teeth; they, at least, had not suffered at the hands of time. "She asked a million questions about you."

"Questions?" His heart gave an erratic beat.

"What you talk about, what you do, whom you see. You are lucky, señor, to have such a woman interested in you. And you would be a fine catch for her."

Richard left instructions that he was not at home if Caryl Dane called, which she did, nearly every day. There was a kind of exquisite torture in knowing this.

Then one morning, according to habit, he was bathing in the cove below the villa. When he was pleasantly exhausted, he climbed as usual onto a bed-sized slab of rock and lay on his back in the sun. It was his favorite daily ritual. Here he felt elementally safe, part of the rock and the sea and the sky, all of which seemed designed to shelter him, to camouflage him from any hostile force. Sprawled naked in the sun, he lost all misgivings about past and future.

"May I share your ocean?"

Behind dark glasses his eyes flew open. In one movement he sat up and pulled the towel over his nakedness.

She was standing on the stone steps cut into the cliff below the terrace. "Sorry, Richard. I didn't mean to alarm you."

He was furious. Pio had no business letting her in.

"It looks so inviting," she said. "I hope I'm not bothering you. May I use the other towel when I come out?"

He murmured something, none too graciously, and lay back. The sun, which had been pleasurably warm, now made him sweat. When he looked up again, her clothes were spread on an adjoining rock and she was in the water, her bare brown shoulders glistening.

He tried without success to quiet a feeling of nervous exhilaration. He looked up toward the villa, silently imploring Pio or Ramon or Margarita to come to his

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rescue with some urgent matter, demanding his immediate attention.

He couldn't help staring as she came wading out of the water. Her body was superb.

Wrapped in the large red and yellow striped towel, she sat on the rock beside him, squeezing excess water out of her hair.

"I've made some hideous faux pas," she said with a plaintive smile. "I must have. But for the life of me I don't know what it was. Tell me, Richard."

"I'm sure you're incapable of a faux pas."

"Then why have you been avoiding me?"

"I haven't."

"You baffle me, Richard. You're like stone sometimes. I think you could face anything and not be the least bit disturbed. Even murder."

The dark glasses protected him, and she couldn't hear the pounding of his heart. Rage made him suddenly reckless. "What do you want from me, Caryl?"

She gave him a winsome look. "Don't you know?"

"No. I wish you'd tell me. It would make things much simpler."

"But I did tell you. I want to recruit you for Fiesta."

"Is that all?"

"What a paranoid humor you're in this morning, Richard."

He tried not to show his temper. "Well, why me? You don't know a thing about my qualifications. Or have you checked up on me?"

"A bit. You don't mind, do you?"

Cat and mouse. He'd be terrified if this were happening in Eau Claire; but here, beside the wide blue sea under the vast protective sky, it was no more than a child's game.

"Why should I? I've nothing to hide."

"Then take off that silly towel and come here."

Helpless, he glanced once more up at the villa.

Afterward, when she was dressed and ready to leave, she said softly, "I had to find out, Richard."

"What?"

"If you were human." She smiled. "And you are. Indeed you are. Poor Catherine."

He watched her as she began to climb the steps. "What do you mean, poor Catherine?"

"That she had to lose you."

He felt vulnerable, betrayed by his own senses, by something as gross as lust. He'd had a feeling about her from the start. He should have obeyed his saner in-

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stincts then and fled. As cloudless as ever, the sky now seemed menacing. He placed his foot very cautiously on each step, held tightly to the rail. The world had turned into a massive trap.

He had to know where he stood, what plans he must make. With ambiguous motives, he asked her to stay for lunch; despite the danger she represented he knew that he wanted her again. Or did he believe he could win her over, seduce her from her purpose?

He couldn't bear the thought of Ramon grinning and posturing between them. The situation could not be saved by comic relief, so he sent him into town for champagne.

Meanwhile, all he could offer her was an insignificant red wine, but she appeared to enjoy it. So did he, at first, until he began to feel oddly light-headed. The colors in the room began to intensify, to vibrate and melt together.

"Are you all right, Richard?"

The candles shot out blue and green sparks. Her face wavered, its features oozing into a waxlike blob. He heard her say, "Pio! Help me get him to the sofa. Loosen his collar."

Her face swam above him as if he were seeing it through a dense sheet of water.

"They sent you, didn't they?"

"Richard? What do you mean?"

"Tell me! Don't play games! *They sent you.*"

Her face began to float away as he seemed to sink lower, until he could no longer see it at all through the viscid dark water. Still, he kept moving his lips, shaping words of accusation which he hadn't the strength to utter.

Later, in his own bed, he awoke with a headache and a feeling of not being all in one piece, his memory even more fragmented than his body.

Margarita drifted in, stared silently, disappeared. Presently Caryl Dane came into the room.

He looked at her in surprise. "What happened to me?"

"Something you ate, I'm afraid. I was really scared, Richard. The doctor came and pumped your stomach. I stayed the night."

"The night? You mean it's been . . . hours?"

She smiled, felt his head. "Hours and hours. How do you feel?"

"Funny. All apart." He wiggled his toes, surprised they were still on his feet.

"It'll pass." She drew up a chair and sat down beside him. "Richard, when you first got the attack you said something very strange. You said, 'They sent you.' You said it more than once. 'They sent

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you.' What did you mean by that?"

He felt uncannily relieved, smugly in control. "Search me. I don't remember saying anything like that."

"But you did. Ramon heard you. So did Pio."

"I must have been out of my head."

"You're still a bit woozy. The doctor left this capsule. You must take it and then try to sleep."

It looked innocent enough, an ordinary white capsule, but it made no sense; he had already slept the clock around, if he could believe her. She handed him a glass of water. He put the capsule in his mouth, holding it pressed between lower lip and teeth as he swallowed the water. He lay back on the pillow. She smiled.

"Sleep now, Richard. You'll soon feel better."

As soon as she'd gone he removed the capsule and slipped it under the pillow, then lay back and closed his eyes. Minutes passed. Then he heard the door open and caught the breath of her scent as she sat down beside him.

"Richard?"

He didn't answer.

"Richard, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Good. You're going to be fine. Listen to me, Richard. When you had your attack, you said, 'They sent you.' You said it, Richard. 'They sent you.' "

"Yes. They did send you. I know they sent you."

"That's right, Richard. They did send me."

"I knew it."

"So you may as well tell me all about it," she said.

He opened his eyes and fixed her with a cool, derisive stare. She sprang up.

"It's no good, Miss Dane. I didn't take your nasty little capsule." He reached under the pillow for it and flung it away.

"Don't be a fool, Richard. You've already said enough."

"Under the influence of a drug? Whatever you put in the wine? Get out of my house, you prying—"

She laughed down at him. "Do you think sending me away is going to save you? It's all over, Richard." She turned and left the room.

His legs buckled as he got out of bed. He sat back on the edge, testing his reflexes. He felt hardly a twinge of panic. Everything was prepared. He had made plans for such an emergency.

He rang for Pio and while he waited he practiced walking. The longer he was on his feet the steadier he became. The yacht was ready, and so was the cash. When Pio came, he told him they

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were going to take a cruise. Pio looked startled.

"You'll be well paid, Pio. Very well paid. Say nothing to anyone—not even Margarita. Everything we'll need is on board. Did Miss Dane leave?"

"Sí."

"Say nothing to Sanchez. Now hurry, help me get dressed."

Pio's dark eyes glittered. He was game for anything, and he adored the yacht.

Richard would now have all the time in the world to speculate about the mistake he must have made, to spot the flaw in that masterly plan of murder which someone else must finally have spotted. It seemed impossible. Not even Catherine's closest friends had revealed the ghost of a doubt. The doctor had been wholly satisfied. The police had not been suspicious. Yet somehow, some petty irregularity or minor detail had given him away, or at least prompted someone to ask questions.

Half an hour later he was aboard the yacht, with Pio at the helm. Behind them the villa gleamed white in the setting sun. Soon there was only the faint pink glow of the tiled roof. Then it all merged, became a blur, vanished into his past.

Caryl Dane and Ramon Sanchez watched the yacht disappear on the horizon, having come out onto the terrace when they were sure they could no longer be spotted.

Sanchez spoke with a mixture of admiration and perplexity. "So you were right, after all."

She wore an expression of modest triumph. "We had to be sure."

"I would have sworn he suspected nothing," Sanchez said with solemn-voiced conviction. "I would have staked my life on it."

"A good thing you didn't."

"But I was right there in that hotel room," he insisted. "I saw him, even though he couldn't see me. I saw him look straight into the room after Juan grabbed the vixen out of his arms. He saw Cortazan lying there, but I was sure he thought he was drunk, not dead. There was only annoyance in his face, at the music and the woman. I would have sworn he had no suspicions."

"And yet you followed him?" Caryl asked.

"Sí. I am as well trained as you, señora. I followed him from the moment he left the hotel. He had dinner in a restaurant and then went to a bar. He made no phone calls, spoke to no policemen. And when he flew here, Nicho followed him. I apologize to you. I was so sure all of these precautions were a waste of time."

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She gave him a mock bow. "What the woman said meant nothing to him at the time. Your Spanish lessons confirmed that point. So he either suspected Cortazan was dead or saw something in the woman's face that made him wonder." When Sanchez still looked doubtful, she added, "It doesn't matter. He's no longer a threat to us. He can't tell anyone what he saw or thought he saw."

"But why *didn't* he go to the police?"

She spread her hands. "Who knows? He's a strange man."

Yet she, too, was curious and wished there had been time to find out. Delay, however, could have been fatal. Their drug-smuggling operation, for which Fiesta Fabrics was a front, was too risky an enterprise as it was. Cortazan had been a traitor. They had accosted him in that hotel room with his woman and had killed him. Before they could take care of the woman she had broken loose and dashed into the corridor, straight into the arms of a stranger. Had the man understood her hysterical babbling? Did he have any inkling of what was going on in that room? From his subsequent actions it would have appeared he did not, but the head of the illicit organization was an ultracautious and excessively methodical creature. He had instructed Caryl Dane to make sure of the American. She, too, had been inclined to believe it was all a waste of time—until Richard had spoken those three telltale words: *They sent you.* Then she had known what must be done. Pio would take care of him out there—Pio and the sharks.

So now she merely smiled at Sanchez as she took a compact from her bag and began to touch up her eyes. "Perhaps, Ramon, he did not go to the police because he did not want to get involved. Or perhaps, like us, he had something to hide. We'll never know."

They gazed for a few moments longer at the sea and then turned away. Clouds had settled upon the horizon, like smoke from the burning red ball of the sun. There was nothing more to see.

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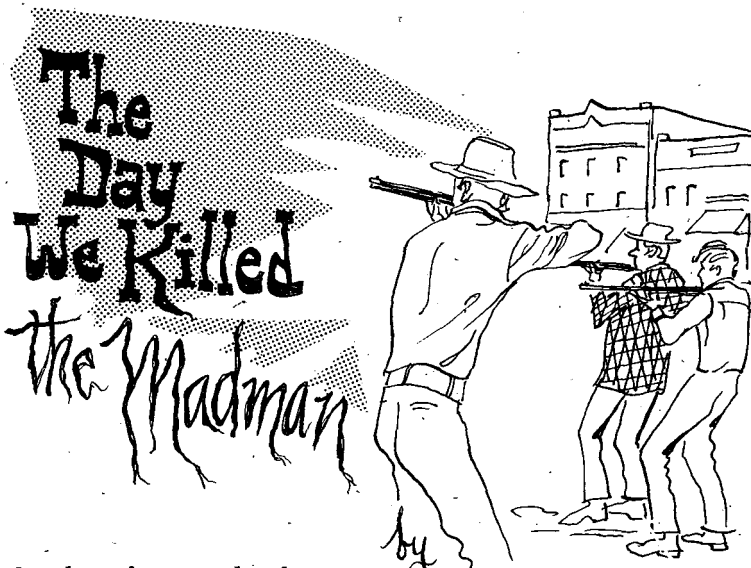
An intrusion may not always, in reality, be unwelcome.



by Edward D. Hoch

Well, the thing happened a long time ago, so long ago that a good many of the original men are dead now, but their sons still carry on the tradition here in Greely Corners, meeting every year on the 24th of June in the lodge rooms over Sam Greely's general store. I was around when it happened, though I was only fifteen, and I can tell you how it was. In fact, I can tell you the whole story, right up to the present, if you want to hear it.

You see, Greely Corners is a pretty small community way back in the hills, with only one dirt road to link us with the state highway. We don't much care what goes on outside, and we never did. Our children grow up and marry someone close to home, and raise a family and grow old and die without ever venturing very far down that dirt road.

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There is one thing that has always intruded on the calm of the town—the sprawling State Hospital buildings just over the hill. When we were kids, the Saturday afternoon sport was climbing to the top of the hill to see how close we could get to the fenced-in grounds where the mad people walked among the trees.

If it was sport for the youngsters, the State Hospital was a constant source of worry among the farmers and townspeople. It was common knowledge that the men and women within the grounds were dangerous—a constant threat to our little community. That was why, on that sunny June afternoon so long ago, old Greely himself ran to the church to ring the alarm bell when word came that one of them had escaped.

His name was Raymond, and he'd killed a man on a farm over in Eastbridge the year before. There was no doubt that he was dangerous and would kill again if cornered. Why they'd put him in an asylum, rather than hanging him with something, nobody in our town could figure out. Old Jaspers, our mayor, took charge right from the beginning. He had Greely open up his general store and issue rifles and shotguns to the men of the village. There were seventeen of them in all, and though I tried to go with them they said I was too young to have a gun.

They spread out, some staying near the main road while the rest headed up the hill, beating the bushes for the escaped madman. It was Jaspers and his group who finally spotted him, over near the McConnell farm. They gave chase, firing their weapons, driving him like an animal toward the main road where the others waited. Once he turned to hurl a rock at his pursuers, to prove he was dangerous. It seemed certain we'd have had another murder or a rape on our hands if old Jaspers and his people hadn't happened along.

I was in the general store, along with most of the other kids, when Raymond came running down the road. The mothers had us firmly in tow, keeping us away from the windows and out of the tempting cracker barrel that stood in one corner; but when Aunt Edith saw Raymond coming down the street, his running feet raising a cloud of dry dust behind him, she began to scream and I slipped out of the door.

Greely had his rifle up, already drawing a bead on the madman as he lumbered forward. I was reminded somehow of a silent hor-

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ror movie my mother had taken us to see in the city the year before. The whole thing might have been in slow motion, stopping, starting, stopping again.

Then Greely and three or four others fired their rifles, all at once, and the madman Raymond died there in the center of the dusty street.

I suppose it was Greely's idea the following year that the seventeen of them should get together to mark the anniversary of the day they killed the madman. When June 24th rolled around, they gathered upstairs in the lodge rooms to talk about it and drink beer. Each man had his own memories of how things had gone that day, and each relived it as it had been for him. They met a second year, and a third, and soon the stories began to take on the overtones of legend. Mrs. McConnell had been raped, almost killed, and old Jaspers had been knocked down by the man. Greely began to emerge as the distinct hero of this new legend, but the others all played their parts as well.

It was in the fifth year, after the death of Jaspers, that one of the remaining sixteen suggested members' sons be allowed to join the group's annual gatherings. Young Jaspers, the village delinquent, was accepted with mixed feelings on the part of some, but it quickly became obvious that he was really interested in upholding the traditions of his father's brave act.

For many, if not all, of these men, the events of June 24th had come to be the most important happening in their lives. They looked forward for months to the annual gathering on the anniversary of the date, and now their sons were caught up in the same sort of excitement. They were brave men all, who had done their duty on that day, and not one of the wives begrudged their annual bout with beer and memories. In fact, some of the wives looked forward to the affair with almost as much relish as their husbands. It was for both sexes a time to relax, to find a bit of the pleasure usually so lacking in a village of this size.

So we went about our business each year, tending the fields and harvesting the crops, and each year the 24th of June came around. When I was old enough to join them, I did so, cautiously entering the meeting room over Greely's store with a sense of achieved adulthood which all the confirmation and graduation ceremonies of youth had failed to in-

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still. I was one of them at last, able to join in the annual rite around the beer keg.

I listened as they talked about that day, even though I knew the story by heart, listened to every new account and variation of our village's moment of glory. Someday, in turn, I would relate the events to my son, so I listened now and drank of the beer of manhood.

So the years passed slowly, with only the deepening ruts in the dusty road to mark the passage of time.

One spring, just after the last of the snow had vanished from the north side of the hill, a stranger came to our village, driving a ten-year-old automobile that gave out with a steaming gasp just as he reached the McConnell farm. The man's name was Quinn, and he was a traveler in farm machinery. Somehow—none of us were ever certain just how it came about—this Quinn decided to leave his job and settle in our village. He made friends easily with the women of the place, because he was a handsome fellow with unfamiliar city ways.

They soon began to call him Roger, which was his given name, and to cook and bake for him. He eyed our village with his glistening stare and said, in his turn, that he might even consider buying the Greely store and turning it into a small supermarket of sorts—like they had in the city.

Within a few months Roger Quinn had become the main topic of conversation in our little community. Some wondered why he stayed, but others quickly supplied the answer. He was found one night in the Greely barn with their teen-aged daughter, not yet out of high school, and the word spread like wildfire.

It was the chief topic of conversation at the June 24th meeting, when the clusters of men around the beer barrel turned their thoughts, for once, away from the day they'd killed the madman.

He's another one like Raymond, somebody observed, and there was general agreement. All the sex nuts aren't locked up. Anybody knows these guys from the city are like that.

Yes, they feared for their wives and their daughters, perhaps as they had feared on that day years ago when Raymond escaped from the madhouse. Then, I'd been too young to know how they felt. Now, I knew the tightness in my stomach and loins.

The very next morning word came—the word we'd almost

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feared. Greely's daughter had taken off in the night with Roger Quinn. They'd gotten as far as Eastbridge before his car had broken down once again. The group that gathered in the general store that morning was in no mood for compromise. They waited for word that the runaway couple was returning, and old Greely's hands were busy oiling his favorite rifle.

"We killed a madman once," he told them. "We can do it again."

"Yes," they agreed.

I stood aside and watched them, watched Greely passing out the rifles just as he'd done all those years ago when Raymond was on the loose. I felt like an observer again, but this time the cold metal of the rifle barrel made me jump as it touched my skin, and I realized that I was one of them.

We marched down the rutted road, in a ragged line like some crawling snake, now bunching, then straggling out in a thin column. There were old men in the lead, men like Greely who'd been through it before, and others like me who'd been so young that last time. Now we had our weapons and we were equal.

Presently we saw two tiny figures in the road. The first was Greely's daughter, who came running to her father with tearful cries. The second was Quinn, still handsome, still in command of the situation, whatever it might be. He wasn't much different from that first day he'd driven into town . . . but the rest of us had changed.

"Hold up," he shouted. "What are the guns for? I brought her back, didn't I?"

We let Greely fire the first shot because, after all, she was his daughter, but when the bullet merely tufted a bit of dust from the roadway and Quinn turned to run, the rest of us opened fire too. We got him when he was halfway to the trees, got him running, so that he kept going for several steps before he went down in the grass on his face.

Behind me, the girl was screaming something, but nobody listened to her.

We felt good. We'd killed another madman and saved the village one more time, and the young ones like me could drink the beer now without a feeling of guilt.

I wondered if, in future years, we'd celebrate both days.

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Some opportunities are just too perfect to ignore.

Always on Saturday

by Virginia Long

It is strange that for a maiden lady such as myself, life goes along very ordinarily for years, and then suddenly all manner of things happen in a single month's time. Or, to be more accurate, one thing keeps happening, over and over and over. Every Saturday it happens.

If I am to tell you about it, I should confess right away that since my life is quiet and uneventful, I tend to take more than a normal interest in my neighbors. In other words, I augment my rather circumscribed existence by observing the little happenings and excitements of theirs. To aid me in this enterprise, I keep binoculars by my chair in the livingroom, where I can sit and watch the houses across the street from the front window, and the Foleys' house to my right from the side window. I'm not prying, you understand; it's just that I'm interested in people.

The thing started four Saturdays ago. I can't really say that I know the Foleys, but I do know quite a lot about them. I'd watched them move in several months before, and when I took a plate of cookies over, I had the opportunity to inspect, if only in a cursory fashion, their furniture and belongings. I thought it only natural that a young couple like that would have ceramic dishes rather than

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could only have been a gunshot. I have never heard an actual shot, but as I said, I do watch television and I'm quite familiar with the sound.

I was very frightened, and I wavered between running to poor Mrs. Foley's aid or calling the police. As all was silence from the house now, I assumed after another moment of hesitation that Mrs. Foley was beyond aid, and with trembling fingers I dialed the police number.

I identified myself as Amelia Carstairs, and told them that the man next door had just shot his wife. I gave the address and then hovered near the front door to watch for their arrival.

It seemed hours, but could not have been more than ten minutes before a patrol car drew to the curb in front of the Foley house. I ran out to meet them and explained that I was Miss Carstairs, who had made the call. I followed he two uniformed patrolmen at a afe distance as they walked up nd rang the doorbell.

After a moment, Mr. Foley ened the door with an expres- n of polite inquiry on his face. seemed slightly surprised to the policemen, and asked if he ld help them. Help them! The e of the man!

ney asked if they might speak to his wife, and he laughed. "What's the matter? Did she forget to pay a parking ticket?"

Unsmilingly, they repeated their request. Mr. Foley's expression changed to one of mingled concern and confusion. "I'm afraid she's not here right now. Would you like to come in and wait? She should be back in a few minutes."

One of the policemen glanced back at me, his face still blank. I'm afraid I must have looked both astonished and dismayed. What a strange way for a murderer to act!

We looked around the livingroom, with its uninspired furnishings. Nothing seemed out of order and there was certainly no blood on the carpet, nor any area of wetness where one might have been scrubbed away.

It was an awkward, strained moment, and Mr. Foley was looking at me with an odd smile when we heard a car turn into the driveway and stop, then the clicking of heels on the porch. Then, who should walk in the door but little Mrs. Foley, her eyes bright with curiosity!

For a moment no one spoke, and then everyone spoke at once. I make no attempt to reproduce the conversation, but the outcome of it was that Mrs. Foley had gone to a movie with a friend.

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real china, and no doubt their livingroom furniture would be replaced by good pieces as they rose in the world. She seemed a rather sweet little thing, if a bit reserved; but from that first day I had an unpleasant feeling about Mr. Foley. He was too big, too—oh, *masculine*, I suppose—and it seemed to me his smile held a hint of cruelty. Mrs. Foley never returned my neighborly call, but young people are busy these days, and I've never held it against her.

Since then, my only real contact with them, until this past month, had been early in the mornings when I went out each day to bring in the newspaper. Mr. Foley came out at the same time almost every day, and we would call "Good morning!" to each other. After a few weeks, he started looking around with exaggerated appreciation as he picked up his paper and would call, "Another fine day for bird-watching!"

I could only assume that he had seen me at the window with my binoculars and had understandably supposed that my interest was in birds; but I could see no reason for his mocking tone of voice, and I felt a bit hurt.

I was aware that they argued quite frequently, but I understand that many married couples do. I rather enjoyed the sight of them standing almost chin to chin, centered in their side window and obviously shouting loudly at each other. Of course I couldn't hear them clearly, but I have seen enough movies and television programs to imagine their dialogue. It was quite exhilarating to me, for I have never raised my voice or had anyone shout at me in all my life. They became almost an obsession with me, and gradually I found myself neglecting the other neighbors to watch them exclusively.

Then four Saturdays ago . . . Oh, my heart beats painfully as I recall it! I had finished my simple supper, cleared away the dishes and gone eagerly to my chair by the side window. Even before I put the binoculars to my eyes I realized I was to be disappointed. The blind was drawn at their window and there was nothing to see, not even a shadow moving behind it. I was particularly interested that evening, because I knew they'd had a very violent argument shortly after he had come home from work, and I hoped to see either its culmination or reconciliation.

As I lowered the binoculars and turned away, it happened. There was a piercing scream, then a shout, and the last words were cut off abruptly by a loud

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Mr. Foley had stayed home, reading quietly until the police came to his door. When I insisted that I had actually heard a scream and a shot, the two policemen, with a glance of apology toward Mr. Foley, made a brief search of the house.

Back in my own livingroom, feeling both indignant and humiliated, I resisted the binoculars as long as I could. At last I gave in to their irresistible lure, and trained them on the Foleys' window. The blind was now open, and I saw the two of them embrace. Mrs. Foley turned and walked away from the square of light in the direction of their bedroom.

Mr. Foley faced the window with a sudden movement, and a broad, triumphant smile spread over his face. Then, moving very deliberately, he went to the side of the television set where I could see a tape recorder. I saw him punch a button, wait a moment, then touch another. He gave a slight, mocking bow in my direction and snapped off the light. I was staring into blackness, thoroughly confused.

For several days I avoided all thought of the young couple. My binoculars remained untouched, and I waited until after Mr. Foley had left for work before going out on the porch for my newspaper.

Toward the end of the week, on Friday I believe it was, I happened to be in the neighborhood drugstore. I was intent on my purchases when a voice boomed in my ear: "Well! Our friendly neighborhood bird-watcher!"

I looked up to find Mr. Foley towering over me. "Hello, Mr. Foley," I said in a very small voice. "I'm afraid I owe you an apology."

"Not at all, not at all, Miss Carstairs. We had a good laugh out of it."

As I made an effort to avoid his eyes, my gaze fell on his hand. He was slowly rolling a small bottle between his fingers, and I felt my blood freeze as I saw the familiar insignia and the word POISON printed on its label. He saw me start, glanced down at his hand and then quickly slipped the bottle into his pocket.

"Think I'll surprise the little woman," he said heartily. "She loves these chocolate-covered cherries." He picked up a box of them from a counter, gave me a wink and went to the cash register to pay.

Nonsense, I was telling myself. Don't make a fool of yourself again! All the way home I warned myself that whatever it was in the bottle, whatever he intended to do

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with the candy, it was no concern of mine.

When I reached home, however, I put my purchases away hurriedly and snatched up the binoculars. Nothing. They watched television all evening, had a bedtime snack of crackers, cheese and milk, and retired at the usual hour.

While it was uninteresting, the tranquil scene was reassuring, and I found myself at the window immediately after supper on Saturday night. Mrs. Foley seemed as usual, but Mr. Foley appeared moody and restless. After an hour or so, he disappeared from the window scene, to reappear a few minutes later and walk over to where his wife sat reading. I caught my breath—he was holding out the box of cherries! She looked up with a pleased smile, chose one and popped it into her mouth. I watched as she ate three of them and I was just beginning to relax when she suddenly rose to her feet, apparently gagging and retching. I sat paralyzed with horror as she clutched at her throat, then collapsed onto the divan. I focused the glasses on him then, and saw him looking at her with a slight, malicious smile. Then he turned and walked unconcernedly from my view. Oh, the callousness, the cruelty of the man! I couldn't believe my eyes!

Yet I had seen it for myself this time. I lost no time in getting to the telephone and calling the police. Again I met them at the curb, and perhaps I may be excused for being relieved that the policemen who came were two I had not seen before.

To be brief, it was Mrs. Foley who opened the door this time. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she seemed to be breathing with difficulty, but it was obvious that she was not dead from poisoning. The simple explanation was that she had had a severe asthmatic attack, which was usually prevented by medicine which she had not taken that day because she had mislaid it. Mr. Foley had gone to the bathroom and found the medicine as soon as he saw her having the attack. She gave me a puzzled, hostile stare as I stammered an apology and left. I hadn't the courage to meet Mr. Foley's eyes.

At home again, I put the binoculars in their case and placed them high on a shelf in the hall closet. It was a miserable, endless week, and I despaired of a future without my hitherto harmless pastime. I persevered, though, until Saturday night came again. Even then, I resisted until long after supper. I tried to watch television, but found the programs dull and

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tasteless, not worth watching.

At last, with something like a sense of doom, I fetched the binoculars from the closet and sat down in the chair by the window. At first there was nothing to observe. I could see the flickering screen of the television set and the back of the overstuffed chair where Mrs. Foley always sat to watch. Then from the side, Mr. Foley stalked into the picture, stood for a moment near the set and appeared to be speaking to his wife as she sat in the high-backed chair. He seemed angry and spoke at length, then with a gesture of disgust disappeared from my sight. I was at the point of lowering the glasses when he came back into view, moving stealthily behind her chair and carrying in his hand the heavy poker from the fireplace!

I watched helplessly as he raised the poker and brought it down repeatedly over the back of the chair. I was unable to move, even after the blows ceased and he walked around the chair to inspect with satisfaction the thing he had done.

After what seemed an eternity, I came to a decision. I went out my door, crossed the lawn and rapped sharply on the Foleys' door. I had only a short wait before Mr. Foley opened it. He looked behind me and laughed. "All alone this time, Miss Carstairs?"

I bit my lip. "May I see your wife?"

"Sorry. She's gone to bed."

"I'm afraid I must insist." I was trembling inside, but I made my voice firm.

"Oh, all right." He stepped aside and waited for me to walk in. I stopped just inside the door and fixed him with what I hoped was a stern gaze.

With one of his lightninglike changes of expression, he grinned cheerfully and went to the door of the bedroom. "Baby! Wake up. We've got company."

"Oh, blast," I heard a drowsy voice mumble. "Not that old ding-a-ling with the cops again!"

I recognized her voice, and there was nothing else for me to say. I marched out and back across the grass with what little dignity I could summon.

There was no sleep for me that black night. I sought every possible explanation, but only one seemed rational. I had been made the butt, not once but repeatedly, of a particularly gruesome practical joke. My soul shriveled as I considered how they must have laughed at me in the privacy of their house.

I closed the blinds and drew the

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drapes on all windows facing their house. I debated watching my neighbors across the street, but I knew with a sickening sense of loss that I would never use the binoculars again. I did not even bother to put them away, and they lay in the livingroom as a humiliating reminder of the Foleys' ghastly hoax.

It was the middle of the week before I acknowledged the fallacy in my reasoning. Not once, at least knowingly, had Mrs. Foley participated in the grisly charades. She had been puzzled, I remembered, and if I interpret the word "ding-a-ling" correctly, was under the impression that I was slightly demented. Mr. Foley knew I was perfectly sane; he knew very well that I had seen and heard exactly what I had described.

By Saturday I was sure, and knew that I must warn Mrs. Foley. I watched for her all morning, but she did not come home until shortly before her husband arrived from work at noon, and I had no opportunity to approach her.

Finally, in the late afternoon, I heard voices from their back yard. I lifted the curtain and saw her weeding a small flower bed along the back of the house while he clipped the hedge that separated our property. Their voices were loud and angry, and as I listened to them quarrel, I saw past them to the far adjoining yard where the Foleys' other neighbors, the Swensons, stood and listened for a moment with unabashed interest before going into their house.

I put on my gardening smock and went out into my own back yard. I could pretend to be pruning the rosebushes if they chanced to spy me, but I knew I must seize even the slightest opportunity to speak to Mrs. Foley.

Almost immediately the quarrel became louder, and then ended with a single, vulgar expletive from Mr. Foley. He threw down the hedge clippers and stomped into the house without a backward glance. I waited a minute or two to be sure he wouldn't return, then slipped around the end of the hedge.

Mrs. Foley watched me with narrowed eyes as I explained that her husband planned to murder her; that first he hoped to discredit me thoroughly as a witness, and when the police would no longer listen to any report I might make, he would actually carry out his plan. I was the only person in the neighborhood who gave them any particular attention, and he could easily explain to anyone else that she had left him or was away visiting her mother.

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I lowered my voice to a whisper. "You must leave him immediately! If you won't do that, you must be on guard every minute. You are in the most deadly danger, my dear!"

She continued to stare at me for a long moment. Then she gave a sharp, derisive snort of laughter. "If that isn't the weirdest story I ever heard! You're not just a ding-a-ling—you're a meddling old busybody!"

I tried to ignore the wounding words, and gripped her arm urgently. "I beg you to believe me. Your husband is, without a doubt, planning to kill you."

She laughed again and shook off my hand. "Look, when I want any advice about my husband, I sure won't come to any flat-chested, man-hungry old maid for it!"

She shouldn't have said it. It was a cruel, cruel thing to say, when I was only trying to help her.

When I got back to my kitchen, my hands were trembling so that I needed both to latch the door. I groped for a chair and sat in a state of black despair. After a while, I pushed aside the curtain and sat looking over into the Foleys' yard. I was staring sightlessly, but suddenly my vision cleared.

I let the curtain drop, pulled the telephone across the counter and with steady hands dialed the familiar number.

When, after a short silence, a voice at the other end asked if I were the same lady who had already sent them on two wild-goose chases, I grimly promised him that if he failed to investigate I would make a personal report to the mayor, and that I felt sure there were severe penalties for dereliction of duty. After another pause, he asked wearily for details and location.

I gave him the Foleys' address. "She's lying in the back yard, stabbed through the heart with a large pair of hedge clippers. The neighbors on the other side can confirm that they were having a violent argument, and I'm sure you'll find only his fingerprints on the clippers."

I replaced the receiver, slipped off my gardening gloves and tucked them into the pocket of my smock before hanging it up. Then I went to the front door to wait for the policemen.

I wanted to see the expression on Mr. Foley's face *this* time.

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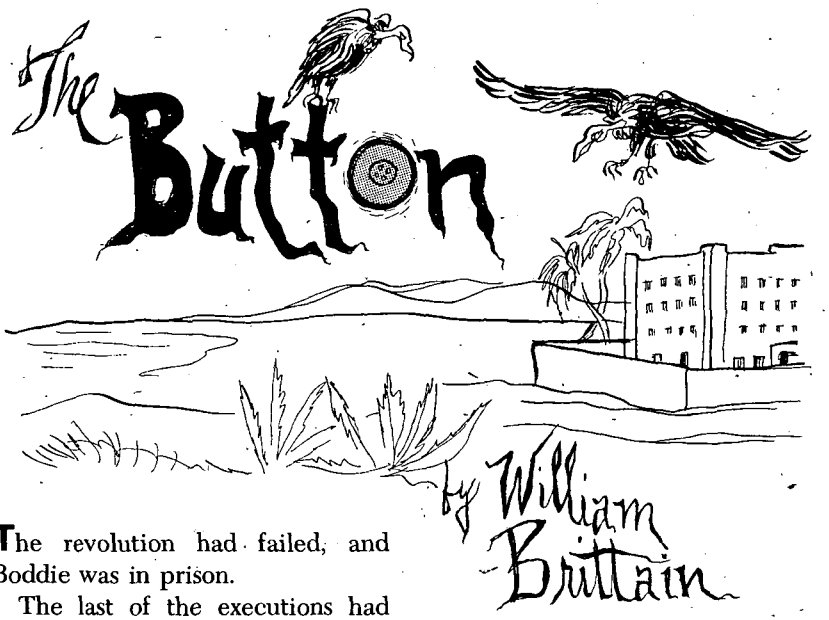
Finding one's weak spot is relatively simple—using it to advantage is quite another.



The revolution had failed, and Boddie was in prison.

The last of the executions had taken place almost a week ago. Through the small barred window of his cell high up in the main building, Boddie had watched the other captured leaders crumple into the dust as the sound of the firing-squad rifles echoed from the stone walls surrounding the exercise yard. Buzzards, hanging in the sky on the trade winds that blew across the mountains of the tropic island, still circled in their search for the countless corpses that remained in the jungles—corpses that were grim evidence of the ruthlessness with which the island's army had upheld the totalitarian regime of General Maximilian Kaul.

For many days after he had been captured, Boddie had sat on the rough bench in his cell with

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fear clawing at his belly. He had waited for the sound of a key being inserted into the lock of the door, when it would be his turn to be marched to the exercise yard and stood against the wall.

Finally, the realization came that at least for the time being he was not to die; because he, of all the revolutionaries, knew a name—the name of the man who had planned, organized and financed the ill-fated uprising.

So, he would live, at least until he revealed the name to General Kaul; and this, Boddie vowed, he would never do.

As he shifted on the bench, the pain crashed through his body. After this morning's session, the pain was particularly bad.

There was nothing subtle about General Kaul's torture methods. The scientific extracting of information, the delicate probing of the mind until it bent to the wishes of the interrogator, was not for him. He considered drugs effeminate and no real guarantee of the truth.

General Kaul's methods were simple and direct: boot, whip and club were brutally brought into play until the subject's will to resist was wiped away in a shrieking agony of battered tissue and torn muscles. Such tactics had always been effective in the past. In addition, they appealed to Kaul's image of himself as a man of pitiless strength.

The longest any previous prisoner had been able to withstand Kaul's cruelty had been nine hours. Yet Andrew Boddie still defied his torturer after a full five days.

In the prison's administrative office, three floors below Boddie's cell, Kaul leaned back in his chair and placed his booted feet on the rough desk, scattering papers with a dusty heel. Opposite him sat a small, thin man in a dirty white suit, wearing a hat of woven palm fronds. The skin of the little man's face and high-domed forehead was as dry and wrinkled as a raisin, and he sat slumped forward in his seat, his eyes staring at the little black bag which rested on the floor between his sandaled feet.

From a drawer of the desk Kaul took a bottle, forced out the cork with a gnarled thumb, and poured several swallows of raw rum down his throat. "Have some, Dr. Damien," he said, proffering the bottle. "Let us drink to tomorrow when, perhaps, our prisoner will see the error of his ways and tell us what we want to know."

"I will drink," said Damien, taking the bottle, "but only to forget this thing you are forcing me to do." After a single delicate

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sip he put the bottle back on the desk.

"It is strange, the circumstances we find ourselves in," Damien went on. "You, General, are trying your best to kill Boddie, and each day when you have finished, I do what little I can to continue the miracle of his being alive. Today your men broke two of his ribs with their rifle butts. I taped him up, and hopefully his lungs will not be punctured."

"It would be a pity for him to die at this time," Kaul agreed, "before he gives me the name I seek."

"His death would be a pity," Damien said, "because he is in the prime of life. Could you not find some method of extracting information that wouldn't be as damaging to his internal organs?"

"You never cease to amaze me, Doctor. Such concern for a proven traitor."

"When I became a doctor I took a solemn oath to have concern for all of my patients," replied Damien. "Believe me, General, I would do anything to save someone in my care."

Kaul sneered. "I suppose, if necessary, you'd lay down your own life to save that of some filthy, ignorant plantation worker."

"That too, if it were absolutely necessary. My oath as a doctor is the pivot around which my whole existence revolves. As for Boddie, if there were a single thing I could do to prevent your killing him, I would do it gladly."

"You wrong me, Doctor," Kaul rumbled. "I do not desire Boddie's death. I simply want him to tell me the name." The general leaned across the desk, and his voice rose in pitch. "And he will give me the name, Doctor. I have never failed with a prisoner before, and I don't intend to start now."

"It's been five days. How much can flesh and blood stand?"

"Whether it takes five days or five times five days, I will get the information out of him!" Kaul slammed a massive fist onto the desk. He sat staring at Damien, his eyes glittering angrily and his face livid.

Then a change came over Kaul. He slumped back into the chair; perspiration poured from his brow, which was rapidly changing to a sickish, pasty gray. He clutched at the front of his tunic, and the sound of his teeth grinding together was clearly audible in the still room.

"The pain, Doctor. It's back. Quick, something for the pain!"

Damien leaned forward and removed a small beaker from the bag at his feet, setting it on the desk. His hands moving with cool

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efficiency, he next took from the bag three small vials of liquid. He decanted nearly half the contents of the first vial into the beaker. With a practiced eye, he added a small amount from the second vial and a single tiny drop from the third. To Kaul, who was clutching at his chest and gasping for breath, the doctor seemed to move with maddening slowness. Finally, as the liquid in the beaker turned a vivid green in color, Damien held it out to him.

"Drink this," Damien said calmly.

With some difficulty Kaul managed to swallow the contents of the beaker. For several minutes Damien was silent, watching the color slowly return to Kaul's face. "Your own life, General, will be considerably shortened if you continue to consume so much rum and allow yourself to give way to these fits of rage. You have had signs before that your heart—"

"When my chest burns in this way," Kaul said, "I will call on you to put out the fire with the green medicine you mix with such care."

"You'd better hope that I'm always available to answer that call," Damien replied. "Prepared by an unskilled hand, the ingredients could be deadly to you."

"There are other doctors," Kaul said. "You're well aware of that."

"Who? Those butchers you train at the army hospital? No, General, before the revolution there were only three of us on the whole island who could mix the green medicine properly."

"And now?"

"The other two were killed by your men during the first days of fighting."

"I see. Then I must take very good care of you, Doctor. And I shall. Be sure of it."

Kaul turned, reached out toward the rum bottle, and then withdrew his hand. "It disgusts me to be dependent on the medicine," he barked. "It is a sign of weakness."

"Then why not take to your bed as I've advised? With rest, your heart could—"

"I would prefer to die a man rather than live as a bedridden invalid. Weakness—I despise it! The pain in my chest that transforms me from a general into a groveling weakling—it's intolerable. Why should such a thing happen to me?"

"Perhaps," Damien said calmly, "Andrew Boddie is asking himself the same question."

"But Boddie can rid himself of the pain. He could have given me the name days ago—a single word—and walked out of here as a

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free man. He's being obstinate."

"I think, General, that you don't know the kind of person Boddie is. He is not a man who lets his body rule his soul. From the time he was nine, he worked the cane fields twelve to fourteen hours a day under the blistering sun just to earn a few pennies to put food into the mouths of his family. He has often waded barefoot in the shallows after abalone, heedless of the sea urchin spines that sometimes pierced his flesh. During times of great hunger, Andrew Boddie has even been known to plunge into the water to spear fish out beyond the reef where the great sharks abound.

"Such a man knows his own inner strength, General. And if he were to allow you to destroy that, he would no longer be free. Nor would he ever again be a man."

"He will talk sooner or later," Kaul said doggedly. "And until he does, you will keep him alive."

"I . . . I will try to keep him alive," the doctor said slowly.

"Thank you, my friend." Kaul grinned.

Damien shook his head emphatically from side to side. "We will never be friends, you and I. You love pain and death too much."

"Oh?" Kaul leaned across the desk, his face twisted into a leer. "You would be happier, then, if it were myself rather than Boddie who received the daily beatings?"

Damien sighed deeply. "Believe me, General, if Andrew Boddie were seated where you are now, and you were the man in the cell, I would work equally hard to keep you from dying. And I would pity you, just as I now pity him."

"Pity is a woman's emotion. A real man, a leader of men, cannot afford such weakness."

"And you pride yourself on being a real man, is that it?" Damien asked.

The general's eyes became slits, and his voice was like the rasping of a knife across a sharpening stone. "I am strong, Doctor. That is the one real test of a man—strength. It is the one thing I respect."

"You are a soldier, General, and I, merely a doctor. Because I am what I am, I respect life—in the weak as well as in the strong. That is why I tend your prisoner each day when your hired thugs are finished with him. Not so that he will tell you a name, but that for another day, or even another hour, he will continue to draw the breath of life into his lungs. For that same reason I continue to provide you with the green medicine. I would do the same for the lowliest beggar or for Satan him-

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self if he were to need my help."

"It's too bad Boddie doesn't share your desire that he remain alive," Kaul said with a chuckle.

Damien looked at the general quizzically. "What do you mean by that? What do you know—?"

Kaul opened a drawer of his desk and withdrew a small object. "This was taken from Boddie when he was captured." He threw it onto the desk where it struck

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with a sharp sound, rolled a few inches and then lay still.

Damien picked up the thing and held it close to his eye, twirling it about between thumb and forefinger. "Just a button," he said at length.

"No, no," Kaul replied quickly. "Not just a button. You see, when we seized him, Boddie tore that from his shirt and tried to put it into his mouth."

"I don't understand."

"It looks solid, doesn't it? But it's really two pieces of shell cleverly cemented together. And between the two halves is a small space."

"Ingenious," Damien acknowledged. "Almost impossible to find the seam where it's joined. But still . . ."

"When we took it from him, Boddie pleaded to get it back. Finally, when he realized we were not about to return it, he told us its secret. The space is filled with a powder: potassium cyanide. I'm sure, Doctor, that you now realize what would have happened if Boddie had crushed that button between his teeth."

At least his death would have been quick, Damien thought. "Then Boddie—" he began aloud.

"If we hadn't wrested the button from him, Andrew Boddie would have died quickly by his own hand, and we would have had no opportunity to discover the name he has locked in his mind."

Kaul grinned sardonically as Damien considered the deadly object between his fingers. "That is why I am sure Boddie will tell me what I want to know," the general continued. "Had he been free to do so, he would have preferred to commit suicide rather than face the possibility that I might get his secret out of him. Therefore, such a possibility exists—and because it exists I will continue to interrogate him in my own way until the possibility becomes a reality." He yanked open the top drawer of the desk and carelessly tossed the button inside.

"I must leave you now, Doctor," Kaul said, slamming the drawer closed and rising to his feet. "My men must be readied for tomorrow's program with Mr. Boddie. Stay a bit if you'd like. Take some rum. It'll stiffen your backbone."

The general paced to the door and then turned. "I suggest that this evening you study the anatomy of the human foot and ankle," he said to Damien. "You may need the information to treat Boddie when my men have finished with him."

As the door slammed, Damien

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rose to his feet. After a guilty glance at the dusty window of the room, he walked around to the other side of the desk. The top drawer slid open soundlessly. There, on top of a pile of papers, was the button. So hard, so shiny—so deadly.

The following day the sun was well past its zenith when Damien was allowed passage into Boddie's cell. He could hear the moaning of the prisoner even before the guard opened the massive wooden door.

"I don't know how that man take it," the guard said, nodding toward the wretched figure on the stone floor. "Sometime I think I should go in an' break he head with rifle butt, just to put he out of misery. But then I think what General Kaul do to I if Boddie die. Do what you can for he, Doctor."

As the cell door slammed behind him, Damien knelt beside the man on the floor, grimacing at the sight of the crushed and broken things that were Andrew Boddie's feet. The man's eyes were wide with shock, and his breathing was short and rapid.

"I didn't tell," he panted in a harsh whisper, running the words together. "Didn't tell, didn't tell, didn't tell . . ."

Damien quickly prepared a hypodermic and thumped it into Boddie's arm, pressing the plunger home. Then he waited and watched as the morphine took effect. Some color returned to Boddie's face, and his breathing became deeper.

Damien put his face close to the floor with his lips pressed against Boddie's ear. "Boddie, listen to me," he said softly, with a furtive glance at the cell door. "Can you hear me?"

"Hear you, Damien . . . won't tell name . . . die first . . . won't tell."

"I don't want you to tell. Here, take this. I got it out of Kaul's desk yesterday."

Boddie stared at the small object in Damien's hand, his mind refusing to believe what his eyes saw. "Button . . . the button. Give it to me. Anything . . . end pain."

"Don't use it now. I need time to make my escape. Here, I'll put it into your shirt pocket. Wait until tonight, Boddie. Then, when it's dark, put it into your mouth and bite down on it. For now, just keep thinking that the pain will all be over in a little while. Just a few more hours. Then it'll all be over."

Boddie scarcely heard the door open and slam shut again as Damien left the cell. The drowsiness

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created by the morphine injection swept over him in waves. The button. He had the button. He could feel it, a small lump in his shirt pocket.

For short moments he passed out, but the agony of his shattered feet kept waking him. As the morphine wore off he willed the sun toward the horizon. Just a little longer and then oblivion; and Kaul would never know the name he sought so desperately.

Finally it was dark. Slowly, painfully, Boddie inched his hand toward his shirt pocket. It was a full fifteen minutes later that he felt the button between his pain-wracked fingers. Equally slowly he brought the hand to his mouth. As the button passed between his lips he thought for a moment that he might swallow it whole, but finally he had it gripped between his back teeth.

With a silent prayer of thanksgiving, he bit down, feeling the outer shell of the button crack and its contents dribble out onto his tongue.

Less than three minutes later the telephone in General Kaul's apartment rang. The aide answered and then immediately summoned Kaul. After hearing the message, Kaul ordered his staff car made ready and he set out for the prison.

"I don't know what get into he," the guard said as Kaul, his heart pounding in his chest, reached the top of the stairs near Boddie's cell. "Listen."

Through the thick door came the hysterical cries of the prisoner. "Quirez!" screamed the awful voice from within the cell. "It's Quirez. Oh God, do something . . . help me. Button should have worked . . . didn't. See, General, see. I'll trade . . . trade name for another button! Quirez . . . man you want. Now help me to die!"

As the babbled words continued, growing ever more incoherent, Kaul began to feel the familiar tightening in his own chest. He smiled in spite of the fiery furnace that had been ignited just behind his breastbone.

"I keep my promises," Kaul croaked to the guard. "Now that I have the name, call Dr. Damien. Boddie is to have the best medical treatment possible. And tell Damien to bring more of the green medicine for me."

Kaul slumped to the floor, pulling his lips back from clenched teeth. He didn't know which was worse—the pain or the weakness he was exhibiting in front of his men—but Damien would be here soon.

It was nearly dawn when Da-

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mien again entered the prison's administrative office. This time the little doctor was almost carried into the room between two bulky guards. The general gestured for the guards to leave and then genially offered Damien rum, which was refused.

"I'd suggest that you keep away from it, too," the doctor said. "Your pains must be getting worse. It took a double dose of the medicine to relieve them this time."

"It was as if my chest had turned to molten iron," Kaul replied. "I could do nothing but lie there on the floor and wait for you to arrive."

"You should not have ordered your men to leave you," Damien said. "You might have needed their help."

"And have them pitying me for being a weakling? I'd rather have died." Kaul leaned back in the chair and pressed the tips of his fingers together. "But I have not had you brought here to discuss my slight infirmity, Doctor," he said. "For the present I am fully recovered and no longer in need of your treatment."

"Then why—"

"After Boddie was taken to the hospital, his cell was carefully searched. Bits of shell were found on the floor where Boddie had spit them out. Bits of a button, Doctor. I've further discovered that the poison button is now missing from my desk." A puzzled expression settled on Kaul's features. "I would never have thought that a man with so high a regard for the lives of those he treats could do such a thing. Nevertheless, I must conclude that as you were the only person with an opportunity to steal it, you gave the button to Boddie."

Damien smiled almost shyly. "If I had given him the button, how do you explain the fact that he is still alive?"

"That was to be my next question. Tell me what happened, Damien. Otherwise you may find yourself in the same cell Boddie occupied."

"It's very simple. I made another button, just like the first. But in the one I made, the little space was filled with powdered sugar."

Kaul frowned thoughtfully. "And just why did you do this?"

"Because I wanted to save the life of Andrew Boddie."

"Perhaps my confusion will be ended in time." Kaul sighed. "Go on."

"You wanted information, and Boddie was willing to die rather than give it to you. An impasse. The only way I could break the

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deadlock and still save him was to see that you got the name you desired."

"Oh? Then the button contained some kind of truth potion?"

"Hardly. My little bag is full of medicines, not mind-bending drugs."

"And yet you broke his will where I failed to do it. How?"

Damien was silent for a long moment. "Have you ever seen a boxing match, General?" he asked at length.

"I have. A sport for true men. I used to participate myself in my younger days."

"Then consider a fighter who, having been mauled and beaten for many rounds, is nearing the end of his bout. Hurt and dazed, he desperately parries as many of his opponent's blows as he can, wishing to retain some portion of his manhood by remaining on his feet until the end of the match."

"I have seen this situation often," Kaul said. "Go on."

"Let us say," continued Damien, "that through some mistake—a trick of the mind or a chance sound in the arena—the fighter believes he hears the final bell several seconds before it actually sounds. What would be the result?"

"It would go badly with him." Kaul smiled. "He would let down all his defenses in the belief that his punishment had come to an end. Both physically and psychologically he would be finished with the fight. In such a case the merest tap by his opponent would topple him."

"Exactly," said Damien. "And for many days Boddie has been in much the same position. Like the fighter, he has had to stand alone with nobody to help him. Daily he has been subjected to the most excruciating torment your men can devise. And in the same way that the fighter's pride refuses to let him sink to the floor and thus end his misery, Boddie's will—his very soul—rebelled at the idea of giving in to the pain and revealing the name you wanted to know. How he must have longed for something—anything—which would give him release from the continual stress of resisting you."

"But a button filled with sugar—"

"Ah." Damien waved an index finger like a conjurer's wand. "But Boddie didn't know the button contained sugar. He believed it was filled with a deadly poison. The struggle, he was certain, was ended. Since he had the button, he could allow his exhausted defenses to drop. No longer would he have to pit his will and his waning determination against the

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tortures he was undergoing. As far as he was concerned, you could do nothing more to him since he had only to bite down on the button to be free of you. For him, as for the fighter I mentioned earlier, the struggle was ended."

"But—"

"But then he bit into the button, and there came crashing into his consciousness the realization that he was not going to die—that he had nothing to look forward to but more torture. The defense mechanism in his mind no longer existed—it had been abandoned the moment I gave him the false button. He was no longer prepared to resist; and, like the fighter, he toppled."

A deep chuckle rumbled out of the general's belly. "A neat bit of psychology, Damien," he said. "I could use a man like you to interrogate other prisoners. You could be very useful to my cause."

"Can't you understand, General?" Damien responded bitterly. "I didn't do it for your cause. I was simply being true to my oath as a doctor: to save the lives of my patients at whatever cost. And I succeeded. Boddie lives, even though you have destroyed his soul."

"His soul is no further concern of mine. At noon, Quirez—the man Boddie named—is to be arrested and brought here. Then I will find out what information he has to offer."

"But why arrest him? The revolution is ended."

"Now I will have my revenge on Quirez and any others who took part in it. The time of dying is not yet over. I'm sure Quirez will disclose others who defied me. Then I deal with them."

Damien gripped the arms of his chair firmly. "No, General," he said. "I think not."

"Ha! Boddie talked, didn't he? Within a few days Quirez will be singing prettily, too."

"And what then? Quirez will name other persons. They will involve still more, and there will be further rounds of executions. No, General, I have not saved Boddie's life just so that others may die."

"Oh?" Kaul's voice dripped sarcasm. "Now that you have taken over the leadership of this island, Doctor, what would you have me do?"

"A single call from that telephone on the desk, General, and Quirez could be in an airplane or boat leaving this island in less than thirty minutes. In that way you will be free of any threat from him, and you lose nothing by this act of mercy."

"Never!" Kaul pounded the table emphatically.

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"But think of all the lives that would be saved."

"You think of them. I will have my revenge." Kaul waved his hand in the air as if brushing away an annoying insect. "I have toyed with you long enough, Doctor. Why should I do what you say just because you say it?"

"Because I have the button. The real one which contains the poison." Damien reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and removed the button, holding it delicately in his hand.

Kaul considered the object for several seconds in silence, then his huge belly began to shake, and his laughter boomed out in the small room. "You? You tiny minnow of a man! You would try to poison me? By putting the contents of the button in my medicine, perhaps? You're jesting, Doctor. You forget that I am, among other things, your patient, and you hold sacred the lives of all your patients. No, Doctor, you're cursed by that wretched oath you took so many years ago. You wouldn't even attempt such a thing."

Damien said nothing, simply considering the button between his fingers.

"Face it, Doctor," Kaul went on. "You're on the horns of a dilemma, and they're beginning to gore you. If I live, all those who opposed me will die. And yet for you to kill me would mean abandoning the one principle on which your whole life is built, and you could never do that. Had you been half a man you would have left Boddie to his fate. With luck, he would have died without revealing the name, and all your problems would have been solved. But even that was beyond you."

"True." Damien sighed. "I'm incapable of allowing anyone in my care to die if I can prevent it. Still, I have come to the reluctant conclusion that in order to save lives it is sometimes necessary to take one."

"You speak in riddles."

"Perhaps. Once again, General, I implore you to make the call which will save Quirez. I remind you that I am the only man on this island who can mix the green medicine properly; and your chances of bringing in someone with the proper knowledge and skill are rather poor, now that reports of the recent revolution have reached the outside world."

"What are you getting at, man?"

"Without the medicine, your next attack could very probably leave you a hopeless invalid, doomed to live the rest of your life in constant pain. You could

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never stand that, could you? You have made a fetish of strength, and without the medicine you would face the imminent possibility of being eternally weak. True, an attack might kill you, but it would be an inglorious death, with your men watching you writhe away your life as your agonized screams ring in their unheeding ears. What would happen, then, to the legends of your vaunted strength?"

"You talk nonsense." Kaul sneered. "Even if you could bear to see me, your patient, enduring pain of any kind, a few minutes of being beaten by my men and you would be mixing the medicine by the gallon. Face it, Damien, you are undone by your own stupid pity for those in your care."

"But what if I were no longer capable of feeling pity? And what if your torturers were unable to bring any cries of pain to my lips?" Damien gestured toward the telephone. "Please make the call, General, and let Quirez go free."

"Your idiotic babbling tires me, Damien. Which is it to be, man? Do you watch Quirez and the others die, knowing that their death is the direct result of your forcing Boddie to talk? Or will you attempt to poison me, thus forsaking the philosophy of a lifetime?"

"There is a third alternative, General."

"I fail to see it."

Without a word, Damien lifted his hand to his mouth and pressed the button against his own thin lips.

Kaul started in his chair. As he looked at the small round button that Damien was holding to his lips, he felt the familiar tightening in his chest. His trembling hand touched the telephone, but he could not bring himself to lift the receiver. To allow Quirez to go free would be a sign of weakness and a denial of his own manhood.

Yet, as the first waves of pain swept through his chest, General Maximilian Kaul gained some small understanding of what life would be like without Dr. Damien and the beaker of green medicine.

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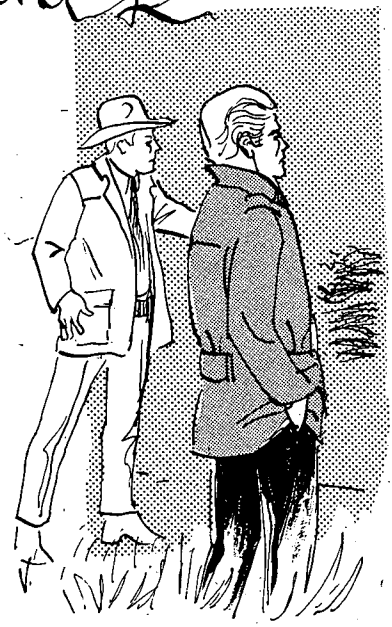
Blood may not be thicker than duty, but perhaps the head is.

END of the Line



My cousin Clarence is a county deputy sheriff and he was going to show me the scene of the crime. He eased the patrol car around the curve. "Who in the world would want to murder the custodian of a town dump?"

I shrugged. "Maybe Elmo's job had absolutely nothing to do with his death. I didn't even know until now that the dump had a custodian."

"We have this new law that says every dump has to have somebody around to supervise dumping. Also, everything has to be bulldozed under at the end of the day. It's the ecology kick, I guess," Clarence explained.

I had been away from Sharp's River for some twenty years—excluding returns for the holidays and such—but two weeks ago I finally returned to stay. "How can the township afford a custodian?"

"The board decided to open the dump only on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons from now on. One to five."

All things change. In the old days the town dump had been open twenty-four hours a day,

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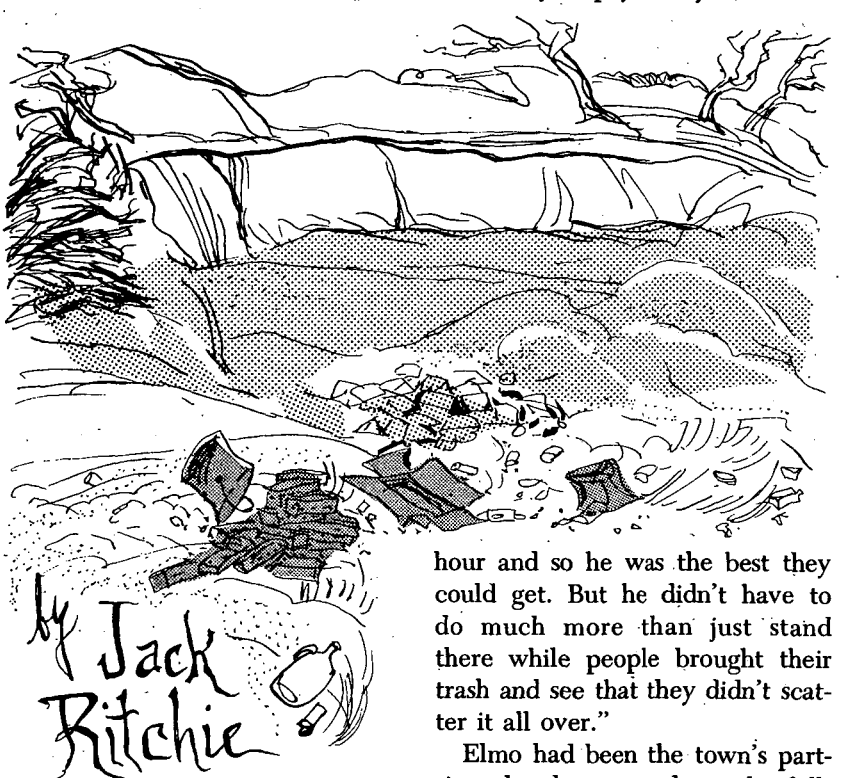
free to all, with no supervision. Our only concession to health and neatness was to have Pete Higgins, after he milked his cows on Saturdays, drive the town bulldozer to the dump site and smooth things over a bit to keep down the rats.

We generally referred to the dump as the Town Exchange and hardly a man or boy, while unloading his own collection of trash, did not spy a perfectly good pair of coaster wheels or some only slightly used two-by-fours which he could claim and take back home.

As a matter of fact, my grandfather built a quite presentable outdoor fireplace and grill with bricks and grates he had salvaged from the dump.

"Why did the board hire Elmo?" I asked. "I would hardly call him the dependable type."

"The job pays only $1.60 an hour and so he was the best they could get. But he didn't have to do much more than just stand there while people brought their trash and see that they didn't scatter it all over."



by Jack Ritchie

Elmo had been the town's part-time handyman and nearly full-

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time drunk. I doubted very much that his wife Margie would miss him at all.

Clarence turned onto the gravel road and stopped at the chain stretched across the road. He unlocked the padlock and pulled the chain off the road into the tall grass.

We drove another two hundred yards through the winding wooded road.

The dump was actually a ravine, now half-filled and covered over. In another fifty years, at the present rate, it would be filled completely and probably turned into a park.

We left the car and Clarence pointed to a spot on the ground. "A shotgun was used. We haven't found it yet. I suppose the murderer took it along with him when he left. Elmo was shot between two-thirty and three last Saturday afternoon."

"How can you be so certain about the time?"

"Dave Perkins finally got around to cutting down those dead apple trees in his orchard. He and his three boys brought the wood and trimmings here at two-thirty or thereabouts. When they left, Elmo was still alive and drinking beer."

I glanced at the pile of applewood at the edge of the ravine. It had not yet been leveled by the bulldozer and covered. Evidently the work had been postponed so as not to disturb the scene of the crime.

Clarence walked around the spot where Elmo had fallen. "The Wicker twins came here at three-thirty with a load of rocks from their fields. I guess they got tired of building stone fences. Anyway, they found Elmo lying here dead and bloody."

I looked at the rocks near the bottom of the ravine. Obviously the Wicker twins had decided that as long as they were here, they might as well unload before calling the police. "Have you considered robbery?"

"Elmo had $2.27 on him and that was about his average." Clarence sighed. "The most logical suspect, of course, is his wife."

Ah, yes. Margie Duggan, née Burke. Some eighteen or nineteen years ago she had married Elmo.

Actually the match had not seemed totally unacceptable at the time. Elmo's father had owned the furniture store and funeral parlor. However, he made poor local investments and died in debt. Elmo, faced with earning a living in a nonpaternal world, gradually and steadily deteriorated.

The air was a bit nippy and I turned up my coat collar. "I just

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can't see Margie killing him."

Clarence seemed to want to agree. "Elmo had only enough insurance to bury him decent. Margie claims she was in her basement doing the wash at the time Elmo was killed. Unfortunately there's nobody who can back her up on that."

Looking down the ravine again, I saw a perfectly sound, though slightly soiled, lamp shade; also two returnable soft-drink bottles. As a boy I'd spent many afternoons here scrounging about for just such treasures.

"On the other hand," Clarence said, "maybe the syndicate killed him."

I blinked. "What syndicate?"

He shrugged. "Any syndicate. There must be dozens, I suppose."

"Now, Clarence, why would the syndicate—*any* syndicate—want to kill Elmo?"

He thought that over. "You can never tell about people. Maybe Elmo had a French Connection or something. He might have safe-deposit boxes full of money."

"Clarence, if Elmo had money, he wouldn't have been drinking beer."

We got back into the car and Clarence drove back toward Sharp's River, some three miles down the main road. It is a singularly quiet and beautiful village, the total population of which has not varied by ten percent over the last two hundred years. Most of our high-school graduates are forced to leave for greener economic pastures, returning for holidays and funerals, and wishing sincerely that it were possible to remain here.

After high school, I too left Sharp's River for college and law school, and New York, but I determined that as soon as possible—preferably before dotage—I would return for permanent residence.

Clarence parked in front of Margie's home, a Cape Cod over one hundred years old, set on an acre of spontaneous garden and comfortably shaggy lawn.

Henry Tupper's mail cart was pulled up beside the white picket fence, but Henry was nowhere in sight.

"I'm going to have to ask Margie a few more questions," Clarence said.

I nodded. "I'll wait right here."

As Clarence got out of the car, the front door of Margie's house opened and Henry Tupper emerged. He came down the walk and nodded to us. "Nice crisp day."

Clarence regarded him coolly. "Since when are you delivering the mail personally? Don't people have their mailboxes outside of

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their houses in this town, Henry?"

Henry smiled. "I was just having a cup of coffee. Margie has one ready for me now and then on cold days. She's a very thoughtful woman."

"Is she the only one on your route who gives you coffee?"

"Now that you mention it," Henry said, "she isn't."

Margie stood at the open door. She raised her voice. "Hello, Clarence. Is that Wilbur Peabody out there in your car? Bring him in. There's no point in letting him stay out there in the cold."

Margie let us into the house.

She was still a singularly attractive woman. How old was she now? Not yet forty. She looked ten years younger, and she did not seem unduly overcome with grief at Elmo's death. She led us into the kitchen.

"Let me express my condolences," I said.

Margie's green eyes regarded me rather speculatively. "Thank you, Wilbur. You've come back to Sharp's River to stay?"

I nodded. "I'm retired, so to speak. Been back about two weeks."

Clarence accepted a cup and saucer. "Margie, could you tell me again, in your own words, where you were between two-thirty and three on Saturday afternoon?"

"In the basement doing the washing, Clarence. I have to do it on Saturdays because of my job at the co-op."

"You were alone?"

"Yes, Clarence. Absolutely alone. If I'd known I would be a murder suspect, I would have arranged for a witness or two. Usually my cousin Thelma comes over on Saturday afternoons, but she phoned in the morning and said she had the flu and couldn't make it."

She poured Clarence's coffee. "How long were you gone, Wilbur?"

"Nearly twenty years."

"Counting college and law school? And only twenty years? You must have been a brilliant lawyer or saved your money. Or both."

I smiled. "I saved my money."

Clarence had been looking out of the kitchen window. "Are those clothes poles outside?"

"Of course, Clarence," Margie said.

Clarence nodded. "When a person does the laundry, she's got to hang up the wet clothes, doesn't she? Maybe somebody walking by between two-thirty and three on Saturday saw you doing it?"

"I hang out the wash only on warm, sunny days, Clarence. Saturday was cloudy and gloomy and

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cold, so I used the dryer instead. It's in the basement. Would you like to see it? I think my fingerprints are still all over it."

Clarence stirred his coffee. "I guess not."

Margie handed me a cup of coffee. "Now, if Elmo had only gotten killed at ten-thirty, I would have had a very secure kind of alibi. The mail comes at that time and I talked a few minutes with Henry Tupper. He tells the most delightful stories."

When Clarence and I left Margie's house some twenty minutes later, Dr. Sparrow's car drew up at the curb.

Dr. Sparrow is a tall thin man who wears tinted glasses. He and his wife came to us from Augusta two years ago. Unfortunately she passed away of pneumonia last July.

He nodded to us. "Just dropping in to see how Margie is doing. She has a sore throat and congestion."

Clarence regarded him without enthusiasm. "I didn't know that doctors made house calls anymore."

"Not usually," Dr. Sparrow admitted, "but this is an exception. You can't really expect a grief-stricken widow to drag herself to my office."

He moved past us for the door of the house in an apparent hurry.

"Didn't you forget your bag?" Clarence asked.

Dr. Sparrow stopped. "I won't need the bag."

"You've got the tongue depressors in your pocket?"

Dr. Sparrow glared for a moment and then went back to his car for his bag.

Clarence and I got into the patrol car and he pulled away from the curb.

"I don't think Margie is capable of murder," I said.

Clarence seemed grim. "Anybody is capable of murder if he or she sets his mind to it."

"Let us use logic," I said. "How many automobiles do, or did, the Duggans own?"

"Just one. A ten-year-old Ford."

"And Elmo used it to drive to the dump?"

"Right. It was parked in among the trees."

"If Margie shot Elmo, how did she get to the dump?"

"She could have walked."

"Through town, across three miles of road—or at least open fields—carrying a shotgun? I certainly think someone would have noticed her."

Clarence pulled the car to the curb and took out his notebook. He began writing.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

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"Making a list of all the bachelors and widowers in town. I'm interested only in those of the right age and a good income or some other means. I don't think Margie would get involved in killing Elmo just to marry another poor man. She's had enough of that already."

"Are you telling me that you think she had an accomplice?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "One way of solving this murder might be just to wait and see who she marries after the period of grieving."

"Now, Clarence, if she's been carrying on with anybody, the whole town would know about it."

"Not necessarily. They might have saved their canoodling for after the ten-thirty news. That's when everybody turns off his TV set and goes to bed. The two of them could have worked at the crime together. She stayed home with an alibi while he did the murdering."

"If she stayed home with an alibi, why didn't she have one?"

"Something just went wrong there. She expected her cousin Thelma to come over as usual, but she didn't because she got the flu."

"Yes, but Thelma called Margie in the *morning* and told her she couldn't come over. Surely if Margie needed an alibi in the afternoon, she could easily have arranged to be with somebody during the crucial time."

Clarence sighed. "Maybe she still was able to manage the murder by herself somehow, with the idea of getting married again to someone better. Maybe whoever she's got picked out doesn't even know about it yet."

"That's a pretty chancy way of doing things." I looked over Clarence's shoulder at the list. It contained three names: Dr. Sparrow's, Henry Tupper's, and my own.

"Now see here, Clarence, what is *my* name doing on that list?"

"I'm sorry, Wilbur, but blood isn't thicker than duty. Where were you on Saturday between two-thirty and three?"

"I was at home trying to finish *Adam Bede*. I started reading it nine years ago and I am now on page 178."

"Any witnesses?"

"Just a raven who came a-knocking at my door." I looked at the list again. "Dr. Sparrow?"

"I'm thinking about an autopsy on his late wife's body. This whole sordid triangle could have started longer ago than we dare think."

"Have you asked Dr. Sparrow where he was between two-thirty

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and three Saturday afternoon?"

"He says he was at the medical convention in Portland. But he didn't see anybody there he knew or who knew him."

"What about Henry Tupper? I've never heard of anybody murdering her husband to marry a mailman."

"Why not? The job is steady as long as there's mail to be delivered, and I know for a fact that the starting pay is $3.43 an hour. Henry's been on the job for twenty years and there's no telling how much he's pulling down now. And I know that he gets through with his route at two o'clock."

I smiled. "I have one more name to add to your list."

"Who?"

"You."

Clarence's mouth dropped. "Me?"

"Why not? As you said, anybody can commit murder. I fail to see why you should be excluded just because you are a deputy sheriff. Where were *you* between two-thirty and three on Saturday?"

"I was riding some of the back roads on general patrol."

"Is there anyone who can verify that?"

"I talked to the radio dispatcher a couple of times."

"From where? As far as he would know, it might have been from the dump."

Clarence slowly added his name to the list. "Maybe it was a syndicate killing at that. Did you ever meet up with a syndicate in New York?"

Actually, I had. Three years previously the court had appointed me to defend an indigent named Danny Moore on the charge of breaking and entering. Somewhat to my surprise I obtained a verdict of not guilty. Breaking and entering was not really his stock-in-trade. He had simply fallen into financial straits between assignments by the syndicate.

"Frankly, Clarence," I said, "I can't think of a single reason why any syndicate would want to murder Elmo."

He pondered that for a while. "Suppose it was an accident? The syndicate got the wrong man?" Clarence put away his notebook. "Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"It's Wednesday and the town dump has to open again for regular business and we don't have any caretaker. Since you're retired and all, and not really doing anything anyway—"

"Me? The custodian of a dump?"

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"It would be only for this afternoon. The town board's meeting tomorrow and will probably come up with someone permanent."

"Now, look here—"

"If you find anything out there you can use, you're welcome to take it home. Like Dave Perkins' applewood. You can't beat it for a fireplace."

I rubbed my jaw. Applewood *was* rather scarce.

"And I heard that Elwood Beaver just tore down one of his old kitchen chimneys. He'll probably cart over the bricks today. Must be a lot of them still perfectly good."

I wavered. Come to think of it, I intended to lay a rustic brick walk in my garden. Good aged bricks would be ideal for the job.

Clarence handed me the key to the padlock on the dump chain. "And you might even get some excitement out of it. Suppose the murderer decides to revisit the scene of the crime?"

At five minutes to one that afternoon, I pulled the chain off the road and drove onto the dump site.

Ten minutes later I heard the sound of tires on the gravel road and Jake Nelson came into view with his pickup truck loaded with large plastic bags full of leaves.

I have never been able to understand why people insist upon burning or dumping leaves. They make excellent mulch for the garden—a bit acid perhaps, but that can be easily remedied with a touch of nitrogen.

I directed Jake to put the bags to one side where I could pick them up later at my convenience. Perhaps tomorrow. After all, I was the custodian of the dump for the time being and I had the key.

During the course of the afternoon I was often tempted, but I restrained myself to salvaging only a pair of Scottie bookends and a Teflon frying pan which still retained ninety percent of its Teflon.

I was alone, near closing time, when I again heard the sound of wheels on the gravel road and Clarence's patrol car pulled up.

He got out of the car. "How's business?"

"A little slack. I'm thinking of advertising."

Clarence stared down at the darkening ravine. "I asked Margie to marry me."

I blinked. "You what?"

He nodded. "I wanted to settle a point once and for all. If Margie had an accomplice she was going to marry later, she would obviously turn me down cold."

"But she didn't?"

"No. She accepted my pro-

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posal," Clarence said wonderingly.

"And then you withdrew it?"

"No. I decided that I might just as well let the proposal stand. I mean I've always admired Margie from afar. Of course we're going to wait a decent six months before we get married."

I smiled. "I seem to remember you saying that this murder would be solved eventually by just waiting to see who Margie would marry."

He turned. "Do you think I had anything to do with Elmo's death?"

"Of course not," I said quickly. "Logic tells me that. If you and Margie had planned this whole thing, I don't think you could have done it without some prior canoodling. To establish compatibility, so to speak. And if you *had* canoodled, I'm certain the whole town would have known about it."

"Don't use that word," Clarence said.

"What word?"

"Canoodling."

"You know," I said, "the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that it must be a syndicate killing. Just something that happened, and never will be solved."

He studied me for a few seconds and then went back to the patrol car.

I watched Clarence drive away.

Ah, yes. The syndicate. I had also learned from Danny Moore that a man named Leland Morrison made the killing assignments and that the going rate for a murder was something in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars.

The economics of the situation impressed me considerably. I had not exactly been a roaring financial success as a lawyer, so when Danny, upon leaving me, got into his automobile and promptly and fatally ran into a telephone pole, I recognized the knock of opportunity.

Circuitously and well-disguised—I thought—I contacted Mr. Morrison, presented him with fictional credentials and offered my services as a replacement for the late Danny Moore.

After a probationary period—the liquidation of several minor individuals—I was put on the regular payroll. My new work required that I travel; however, the pay was excellent and I doubt very much whether anyone I eliminated did not merit death, for one reason or another.

In less than three years, I accumulated enough money for retirement—I am not greedy and I did not have to pay income taxes—so I simply disappeared from the scene and returned to Sharp's

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River to spend the rest of my days.

I thought my true identity and location safe, but I was wrong.

Leland Morrison had appeared, smiling; his object, of course, being blackmail. He had promised to keep my little secret from the world and from the syndicate for a price.

However, I do not deal with blackmailers, so I shot him.

After Morrison's death, it struck me that the best and most appropriate disposal of the body would be in the town dump. I would conceal it under some of the debris, and since it was a Saturday, Pete Higgins would be along with the bulldozer to cover it permanently.

When I arrived at the dump, it was deserted, or so I thought. I had not known that it now had a caretaker.

I had been dragging the body to the ravine's edge when Elmo appeared out of the woods where, possibly, he had answered a call of nature.

Of course it had been necessary to kill Elmo, too.

After I shot him, I debated whether to dispose of both bodies in the dump, but decided against it. I did not mind the police finding Elmo, but I did not want a search to uncover Morrison, who could be traced to me—by the syndicate, if not the police.

I put Morrison's body back into the trunk of my car, being thankful that the weather was a bit below freezing, and drove away, wondering where I could eventually dispose of the corpse.

Now I opened the trunk again and dragged Morrison to the ravine and pushed him over. I made my way down and covered the body with some of the Wicker rocks and climbed back up.

I heard Pete Higgins coming up the road with the bulldozer and I watched as he covered the rocks and Morrison's body for what I sincerely hoped was eternity.

After Higgins left, I loaded the applewood into my car.

Yes, indeed, there is nothing so fragrant as applewood crackling in the fireplace on a crisp autumn evening.

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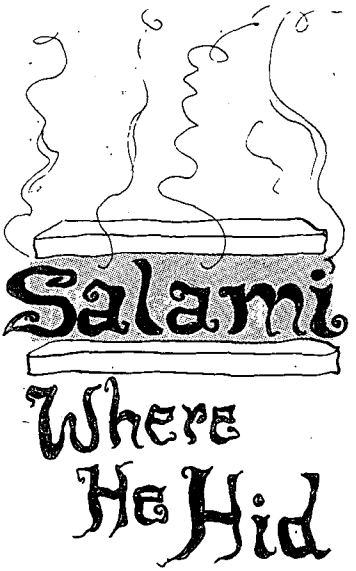
One need not be seen to make his presence known, his influence felt.



It grew increasingly evident that Sgt. O'Toole had fortified himself with a supply of salami sandwiches. Mr. Flathmann, the manager of Grove's Department Store, wrinkled his nose and darted his eyes about to see if anyone besides himself, within smelling distance of the improvised observation post on the main floor, had noticed.

The nearby salesclerks and shoppers had noticed, but they had not yet pinpointed it. Mr. Flathmann primmed his mouth and glared sidelong at the pyramided cartons of deflated beach balls, the towering display within which Sgt. O'Toole lurked.

Was that any way to run a stake-out? If Sgt. O'Toole could not last till noon without delicatessen, he might at least have chosen a gentle bologna.

Mr. Flathmann hurried elegantly away and hurried elegantly back and discreetly sprayed the air around the display with perfume from the cosmetics department. He waited, then sniffed. Much, much better. The nearby clerks and shoppers unfurrowed their brows and once more went unconcernedly about their business and pleasure.

But for Mr. Flathmann's swift rising to the occasion, Sgt. O'Toole's thoughtless choice of sustenance could have given away

by Edward Wellen

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his presence and cost them the capture of the armed robber they were expecting. Mr. Flathmann shuddered at the thought.

Mr. Flathmann shuddered again, this time at the thought that the impending capture might very well be . . . messy. It was all too exciting.

Ever since yesterday, when his friend Jim Scully, the chief of police, had told him of getting a hot lead from one of his best informants—in strictest confidence, one Tip McCoy—that the word was an armed robber had come to town planning to hit Grove's around noon today, Mr. Flathmann had been living on his nerves.

Grove's was hardly in the same league with Macy's or Gimbel's, not big enough even to maintain its own security force, so it was a matter of pride as well as anxiety to the manager that Grove's was big enough to tempt an armed robber to town.

Mr. Flathmann had let Sgt. O'Toole into the store early this morning by the employees' entrance, before the employees showed up for work. Sgt. O'Toole, posing as an electrician in case someone did spot him, carried a long repair kit in which he had a knocked-down shotgun—and, it had become all too obvious, a hefty supply of salami sandwiches.

Mr. Flathmann and Sgt. O'Toole had taken apart the display of slow-moving beach balls and rebuilt it with Sgt. O'Toole inside, leaving spaces between cartons for strategic viewing, and Sgt. O'Toole had settled into his post for the long wait through the morning hours.

Today of all days, purely by malicious coincidence, as soon as the doors opened there began a run on beach balls. Beach balls? Up north here in the fall? At any rate, the tower of cartons began to diminish alarmingly. Again Mr. Flathmann saved the day. It was a wrench to have to remove the "On Sale—Special!" sign, but he could not have Sgt. O'Toole's bulky presence exposed at this stage.

Inside his cardboard observation post, Sgt. O'Toole suppressed a belch and carefully shifted his stance. This was a weary business. Sgt. O'Toole kept an eye on Tip McCoy, who hovered around just in sight, pretending to be a customer. Aside from Flathmann, Tip McCoy was the only person in Grove's who knew he was here. He was looking for Tip to give him the signal when Tip spotted the would-be robber. After that, Tip would fade away and it would be up to Sgt. O'Toole to nail the robber in the act, hope-

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fully taking him by surprise.

Meanwhile, let's see . . . yes, there was just one more salami sandwich left. Flathmann's damn spraying gave it an off-flavor, but he wasn't going to let that, or Flathmann's implied disapproval, stop him from feeding his face if he had a mind and a stomach to.

Mr. Flathmann kept watching the clock in the manner he had trained his minions out of doing: almost noon. His heart beat high. He tried not to glance too often toward his office, at the safe visible through the open doorway.

He sent his gaze out to cover the salesclerks and the shoppers. His gaze rested at first curiously and then with horror on a little old lady.

He made for the observation post and, touching a carton as if adjusting the pile, he hissed at Sgt. O'Toole.

"Sergeant, look there, to my right—no, that would be my left—anyway, over in the linen department. See that little old lady? In the long floppy coat? I believe she is shoplifting."

Sgt. O'Toole knew damn well the little old lady in the long floppy coat was boosting. He had been aware of her for some time. He could not have helped but notice. The little old lady was a clumsy amateur, no doubt a kleptomaniac, the poor old soul. Still, shoplifting was a crime, kleptomania or not, and any other time he would have picked her up for it, like that.

Even if old worrywart Flathmann was forgetting the priorities, Sgt. Vincent F.X. O'Toole was not forgetting them. In his agitation to catch a petty thief, the manager was risking blowing the nabbing of an armed robber.

To lessen the sibilant explosion that went with whispering, Sgt. O'Toole drew a deep breath, one pungent with the spicy aroma of salami, heavy on the mustard, then let out half his air before making the first sound.

"Listen, Flathmann, forget the little old lady. Will you please move away from here before you spoil the whole setup?"

Mr. Flathmann stiffened and reddened and moved away, collecting his dignity as he went. Forget the little old lady, Sgt. O'Toole had told him. That was easy for O'Toole to say. That was not so easy for the manager of Grove's to do.

The manager of Grove's could not ignore shoplifting or shoplifters. It went against Mr. Flathmann's grain to overlook the little old lady's antics. Fuming helplessly, he saw the little old lady in the long floppy coat slyly

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and joyfully scoop up a transistor radio here, a manicure set there, and goodies all over the place. He watched her weigh herself down littler and older-looking.

The salesclerks too had noticed the little old lady was ripping them off, and they were looking to him to do something about it.

He could only shrug and shake his head and suffer their stares. Bad for morale; this would have a lasting effect even after this was over and the robber was forestalled and the clerks understood the reason for their manager's sudden and inexplicable passing up of a chance to grab a shoplifter with the goods.

Now the little old lady was getting away with it, staggering out of the store under the burden of her loot.

It was too much for Mr. Flathmann.

Sgt. O'Toole was fit to bust—and no doubt the surrounding pile of cartons would have exploded with him—for just as the manager rushed to the observation post again, knocking on a carton to get his attention and pointing furiously at the little old lady who was vanishing through the glass doors, Sgt. O'Toole had seen that Tip McCoy was giving him the nod. Tip indicated a bulky man who had just come in and who stood looking innocently around.

"Get away, Flathmann," Sgt. O'Toole begged.

It was too late, though Flathmann had the grace to come to himself and slink away. The bulky stranger had turned around and walked out through the glass doors.

Of course. The manager's stupid action had wised up the man and warned him off.

Sgt. O'Toole gave it another half hour, then dismantled his shotgun and stowed it in the repair kit and moved boxes aside and stepped out, stiff and cramped in body and spirit.

He stomped past Mr. Flathmann straight to the men's room and then went back to headquarters.

A bad half day at Grove's. Sgt. O'Toole had got neither the armed robber nor the little old lady shoplifter. He hoped Chief Scully would believe him that it was all Flathmann's fault.

Tip McCoy had faded away after giving Sgt. O'Toole the office. Out on the street he stopped in a doorway and took a belt of a fifth of rye still in its paper bag. Ahead of him down the street he saw the little old lady in the long floppy coat come to a tottering halt at the corner.

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Tip watched the traffic cop take the little old lady by the elbow. Tip choked. Then he saw the cop was holding up traffic and helping the little old lady across the street. Tip sleeved his mouth and watched his old Aunt Melba totter homeward.

He sighed with relief and smiled. The old ham. Well, the old girl had got away with it. She had given up her profession years ago, knowing she was past her prime, but every once in a while she got this irresistible craving to try her arthritic hand at boosting just one more time.

Tip McCoy couldn't bring himself not to humor the old girl and do all he might to see she didn't get caught at it.

He wondered vaguely who the bulky man had been. Actually, anyone who happened to wander through the store would have served just as well to distract O'Toole from pursuing Aunt Melba.

Best of all, there would be no kickback—not from the robber, because there was no such animal, and not from the cops, because it was hardly Tip McCoy's fault the robbery attempt had not panned out, owing to the manager's giving away the presence of the law.

No one, least of all Chief Scully, could say Tip McCoy hadn't done his part. Come to think of it, this kind of make-believe crime deserved more looking-into as a good—and safe—way of building a rep with the cops.

Somehow Aunt Melba made it back to her one-room apartment. She bolted the door and struggled out of the heavy coat that bowed her down farther than even her years warranted. She shook the loot out of the roomy inside pockets into a heap on her daybed.

She spread out the pile, fondling the merchandise and toying with it. Quite a haul. Almost up to herself in her best days, which was saying a lot.

She picked up the big bottle of expensive perfume, held it a while, then playfully sprayed the air of the room with its contents. She sniffed, then frowned.

She read the label. Yes, it was the right name. The nice young salesgirl had assured her that was the name of the scent that had filled the air in Grove's. Yet here in her room, it somehow lacked that certain something it'd had in Grove's.

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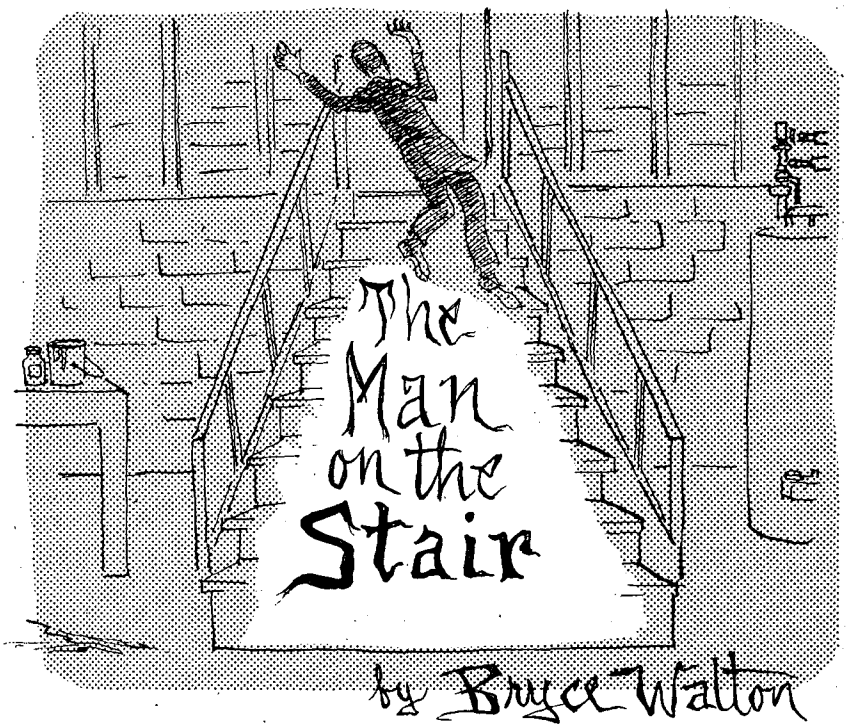
When the record becomes stuck, perhaps it has been played before.



Richard Brocia III squirmed with fury on the couch, kicked his stumpy legs, pounded a chubby fist against the wall and continued his familiar chant.

"—and then I'll kill him. I'll kill him. I'll kill him . . ."

The doctor curled deeper into his chair behind the head of the couch. He was touching his thinning gray hair, then his thin face, finally massaging his left temple gently with the tips of two long tapering fingers that quivered very slightly on the ends.

The old aching blood-throb was

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coming back. He squeezed shut his eyes and snapped them open, resisting a stupor of bored impatience the way a late-night driver desperately battles road euphoria's deadly spell.

One must hang in there, of course. Wait, listen sympathetically for clues, wait for Richie's defense to break—and it would. It always breaks if you wait patiently enough, and Richie's defense—this rigid, obsessive, repetitive account of his wife's imagined affairs with ghostly lovers—must wear itself out like the groove of a stuck record. Then the shriveled and desiccated fragments of Richie's personality could start limping out into the open.

Only we mustn't draw it out too long, Richie. Three months isn't really long, not in here. Three months is only a beginning when the path leads to the end of darkness; but you haven't moved at all, Richie. You revealed so little, then stopped there in the groove and it just goes round and round and round; Lara and her demonic fantasy lovers and your plans for sweet vengeance. That's all I know, Richie, and I must know more; a great deal more about many things.

In your case we simply cannot wait too long. Paranoia, in any form, even that of delusional jealousy and hallucinated lovers, can be dangerous. Proper clinical measures might call for a private sanitarium; but perhaps not. One must be sure—one must have sufficient information . . .

The doctor stopped writing in the spiral notebook. He stared wistfully at the oversized, prematurely balding top of Richie's head, the way it twisted like a wounded turtle's.

"Richie? Where are you?"

"Last night. I almost had him." Richie's mouth quivered in a baby's primal snarl. "I cut out early from my Wednesday bowling and caught them snaking around at poolside. Heard them laugh as I slipped in through the garden and climbed over the patio fence. Same guy I told you about before when I nearly caught them parked in the car out at Hanson's Lake. I told you about that."

"Yes, you told me."

"Same guy. Tall, with the low voice."

Richie pounded the wall harder. The doctor rose as quietly as possible and rescued a gold-framed certificate before it jarred loose from the wall and fell to the floor. He put it carefully on the glass-topped desk, *Columbia Institute of Psychiatry, Bayne Kessler, M.D.*

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As the doctor turned to tiptoe back to the chair, Richie was elbowed up on his side, his odd, pale sheep eyes straining up with petulant accusation. "You weren't even listening!"

Doctor Kessler sighed and managed the benign smile. "Of course I was listening, Richie. I always listen." He sat down and picked up the spiral notebook and pen from the side table. "Please go on, Richie. You climbed the patio fence—"

Richie flounced over onto his back again. "I had him. See?" He breathed hard as he fumbled from under his suede jacket a strip of raveled white cloth and waved it like a banner. "I chased him. Just as he went over the fence I grabbed his sleeve. He tore loose and ran off through the trees. But I got this. It'll be his neck next time and I won't lose my grip."

Doctor Kessler squinted uneasily. Torn from a shirt cuff, all right, but from whose shirt, and how? Richie often brought in trophies he claimed were left behind when he frightened away one of Lara's lovers. The cigarette lighter, the fountain pen, the handkerchief, the cigarette butts, the pocketknife and the rest, like this bit of shirt cuff, never had initials or any other way of identifying their source. Never a wallet, a driver's license, a credit card or anything that might separate substance from shadows.

Their faces or any distinguishing body features were never quite clear to Richie. It was always night, always too dark, or too far away for them to be anything but fading outlines, fantasies of men who were never caught in flagrante delicto. They would never be caught except in wish-fulfilling dreams; and then, of course, there would be murder most foul.

But how to murder a delusion? Paranoids were clever at turning up substantiative evidence of systematized delusions.

"Know how I knew she'd be with him last night?" Richie waved the raveled snag of sleeve.

"Tell me, Richie."

"The night before last, Tuesday, I told Lara I was dead from lack of sleep and had to have a good night's rest. I pretended to take sleeping pills, only they were aspirin I'd put in the sleeping-pill bottle. Then I pretended to be really knocked out on the couch. Lara hung around and shook me to be sure. Later, after she left, I lifted the phone and heard her on the extension setting it up with lover-boy for Wednesday night while I bowled. Same voice, like I told you. I felt sort of cruddy lis-

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tening and spying . . . but I have to find out who he is so I can get him." He curled up on his side, fists clenched against his chest like a baby with colic.

Doctor Kessler was conscious of covering his growing irritation with a deliberately low, gentle tone. "And Lara? She, of course, denied again that there was anyone there?"

"Sure. Same old business. Maybe it's a plot. Maybe they've made Lara go along with a plot to brainwash me, to make me think I'm out of my tree and seeing little men who aren't there."

"Why would they do that?"

"Some of my Daddy's bank. Nearly a million dollars in community property. Hell, don't you know? But I don't care. I know what I see and next time I'm going to get what I see!"

Yesterday upon the stair, Doctor Kessler thought. *I saw a man who wasn't there. He wasn't there again today. Oh, how I wish he'd go away.*

This really mustn't go on. Continuing treatment depended on knowing the exact nature of the disease. Persisting doubts about the original diagnosis must be settled. Either real or delusional lovers could serve Richie's defensive needs, but his possible cure could not be served at all by insecure, unsubstantiated diagnosis.

His original, tentative diagnosis of delusional pathological jealousy still seemed right; what evidence he had been able to gather pointed to it. Richie could never identify a lover. He heard their whispers on the phone, in the dark, through walls, in his nightmares and daydreams—but he never turned up a single supportive fact or clue, never any addresses, phone numbers, names or descriptions. He said they used secret codes, even used telepathic extrasensory perception to frustrate him. On several occasions during sessions, Richie insisted that while Lara waited for him in the car, she was talking with some ubiquitous playmate. When Doctor Kessler looked down there, however, he saw the car, but no one in it—no Lara—no lover.

"There they go," Richie shouted. "Around the corner!"

Doctor Kessler saw no one disappearing around a corner, or into a crowd, or even into thin air. Delusional jealousy was not uncommon. Many had such a low opinion of themselves they couldn't imagine anyone not preferring someone else; but Richie's case added up to a rather extreme, dangerously paranoid form of the disorder. Doctor Kessler

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still believed that was his problem.

Yet, what if that tentative diagnosis had been wrong—or just partly wrong? What if Richie's "delusions" were based on justified suspicion? What if Lara really cheated? Very discreet social inquiries had turned up nothing about Lara that supported Richie's claims, but those inquiries had been very limited by necessary prudence.

Doctor Kessler didn't believe he was wrong, but it was always possible. If he were, then it called for a radically different approach to Richie's therapy.

On the other hand, if he were right, he couldn't allow a dangerous state of delusion and fantasy to continue; not without direct clinical action.

Irritation flared up suddenly, out of control. Doctor Kessler stood, leaned over Richie and heard himself using a surprisingly hard and critical tone. "You're not kidding me, Richie. And you'd better stop kidding yourself. It isn't getting us anywhere, is it?"

Richie looked up and blinked incredulously. After a while he whispered, "What?"

"You don't want to find out who these guys are, Richie. And you never will, because you're a coward. You're afraid to find out. If you do, you know you'd find out something else—the final, unbearable truth—that you're too weak and helpless and afraid to face up to them."

Richie sat up slowly and slid down the couch away from Doctor Kessler's shadow. His face was a pale mixture of betrayed trust—and fear. He began shaking his head from side to side in painful denial.

"Yes, that's how it is, Richie, and in your heart you know it. In your imagination, your fantasies, you enjoy endless plans for bloody vengeance, but all the time you know that in reality you can only face the terror of your own helplessness and cowardly cringing—"

"No," Richie said. He jumped up and backed away. "You're all wrong. So wrong it's ridiculous."

"Am I?"

"Yes, yes, and when I catch him you'll find out how wrong you are, damn you!"

Doctor Kessler shrugged. "It's so easy to find out who they are, Richie. Do what anyone else would do—hire a private investigator."

Richie stared for half a minute. "Why . . . how can you—a doctor—suggest such a filthy thing? How can you even think of it?"

"The question is, Richie, why haven't *you* thought of it?"

"No! Do you think I'd

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really have some stranger, some outsider, sneak and spy on my—on Lara—to find out . . . to see what she . . ."

"Sorry, Richie. Your time's up."

Richie straightened, snarling, "My time's up here, period. I've had it with you, Doctor. You can't do me any good. You don't even know why I came here, do you? I came here hoping to be able to help Lara. She's the one who is sick. She blames me for everything and won't admit she needs help. But you don't understand and you can't help, and I don't need your help. I know what to do."

"You may feel differently tomorrow, Richie. I hope so. Call me whenever you feel like it. And—"

Richie went out and slammed the door. His squatty shape blurred on the other side of the frosted pane and seemed to drift away through murky water.

Doctor Kessler moved a hand as if to call him back. Then he sank onto the couch while the office slowly turned gray, and the aching blood-throb pulsed past his left temple. He massaged the ache ritualistically with the fingertips of his left hand, the way his mother used to do, knowing it was anger at himself—and fear. Also guilt and uncertainty, for losing his professional control, and giving in to exasperation—letting Richie have such an unprepared shocking broadside of cold truth.

Really shook Richie up though, the doctor reflected. Shocked through his defenses a little. Really frightened him, without warning, without preparation. Suddenly switching from the role of warm, supportive, sympathetic listener to hard, uncompromising, directive coercion. Sometimes that can be effective; so can shock therapy—sometimes. Coercive, manipulative, authoritarian methods can also be dangerous. He really did not approve of the technique, especially with a patient about whom he still knew so little. It was almost like performing a surgical operation in the dark. Sometimes it seemed necessary to take risks, but he should be ready to assume responsibility for the result.

Doctor Kessler stood up heavily. He kept massaging his temple as he went to the window and opened the venetian blind and realized that it was the first time all day that he'd looked out on the world. It had been snowing for hours and it was nearly dark. There was no sky or earth in the falling quiet, only sifting snow. The world could end and he would never know it as he sat im-

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mersed in the debris of some wrecked personality.

He sat at his desk, switched on the green-shaded lamp and a tatter of white caught his attention. The torn bit of shirt cuff fluttered on the rug near the door like a dead moth.

After peering at it for a moment, Doctor Kessler picked up the phone book and flopped it onto his desk. He riffled nervously through the yellow pages.

Dreams, delusions, lies—they are helpful clues to the unconscious; but first you must have a fair idea what is or is not true.

Ice Cream . . . Ignition Service . . . Illustrators . . . Incinerators . . . Insurance . . .

Investigators—Private.

"Flynn Detective Agency," he read. "Investigations made everywhere. Domestic troubles, personal relations, shadowing, tracing missing persons, locating, surveillance. Skillfully performed—low rates—quick results. Strictly confidential."

He called and told Mr. Flynn to start work at once, that same Friday night, even though it would count as a full day, at fifty dollars a day plus expenses. When Flynn found out anything—or an indisputable absence of anything—he was to phone Doctor Kessler at home or at his office.

Doctor Kessler waited with a tension of which he was conscious, even while listening to other patients. Richie did not turn up for his Monday appointment, nor for his Tuesday or Thursday appointments, and he didn't call.

Mr. Flynn phoned Thursday night. "Mrs. Brocia never played around, I can assure you of that. And I'm absolutely sure she isn't playing around now. I'll have a full report for you tomorrow, but first I want to check something out. Something's weird here, Doctor."

"Weird?"

"Yes, I think it's weird. I'll call you later."

Friday morning, as Doctor Kessler showed his 10:50 patient out, a heavy, solid man wearing a dark suit of uncertain vintage, and a porkpie hat, stood in the waiting room.

"Doctor Kessler?" he said softly. His face seemed dour and inflexible, with a permanent cleft of distrust between thick eyebrows.

"Yes," Doctor Kessler said, noticing that the man also had an odd sadness marking the corners of his eyes.

He opened a worn wallet. A golden badge glittered. "Detective Bates," he said. "Homicide."

Doctor Kessler felt a drop of sweat slide down the left side of

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his nose. It loosened a nervous flush down his back that rippled painfully. "Homicide?"

"We just took Richard Brocia into custody on suspicion of murder. You know him?"

Doctor Kessler realized that his mouth was open and the inside of it was dry. "He's a patient of mine."

"So Mister Brocia has been telling us."

Doctor Kessler touched his fingers to his left temple. "Can you tell me what happened? Can I see him? I'd like to see him as soon as possible."

"He said he didn't want to see you," Detective Bates said without expression. "But he wanted me to give you this." He held out a folded paper.

Doctor Kessler took it, unfolded it and read:

Dear Doctor Kessler,

You said I was a coward, afraid, couldn't do it. Well I got loverboy, all right. I got a gun and I shot him seven times, so he won't come messing around anymore. You were so wrong about me. You just never understood anything.

Richie

"I'm—I'm—" Doctor Kessler held the paper out as if he didn't know what to do with it. Detective Bates took it, folded it and put it back into his pocket, as Doctor Kessler went on, "—I'm sorry . . . very sorry to hear this. Who—"

"His wife, first of all."

"Lara?"

"Found her buried, or, rather half buried, in the basement. Medical examiner says she's probably been buried there for about three months."

Something skidded slightly.

"The other victim was a guy who evidently tried to dig her out. Brocia came into the basement from the side door and surprised the intruder and started shooting. The victim ran, and died on the stairs leading up out of the basement."

He held out a card. "He had your calling card on him, Doctor Kessler. You know anything about him? A private investigator, name of Flynn?"

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One should really look at both sides of a situation before he leaps to a conclusion.

The morning sky hung gray and low over the cliffs north of Beach City. An old Packard with a new white paint job idled in the roadway leading into the blacktopped ocean-view parking area. The car's wedged grille aimed dead at the wooden barrier between the parking area and the edge of the cliff.

With a bang the driver's door burst open and a man tumbled out. He hit the asphalt with his shoulder, rolled over, bounced to his feet and climbed back into the car. The door jumped open again and the action was repeated. Then once more.

After his third tumble from the car, King Daggett nodded his approval and made a thumbs-up gesture to the people who stood around the camera off to his right. On the left was a row of sand dunes tufted with brown grass. Daggett raced the engine impatiently as a bearded man left the group of watchers and limped toward the car.

"Everything okay?" Fritz Coyle asked, leaning in through the glassless window on the passenger's side.

"Of course everything's okay. Didn't you see me give the signal?" King Daggett's boyish face creased with annoyance.

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"I just wanted to be sure, King." Coyle reached into the car and tugged at one of the knobs protruding from the dashboard. "Hand throttle all right?"

Daggett seized Coyle's wrist and shoved the arm back outside. "Damn you, keep your hands out of here. I spent all day yesterday testing and tuning this heap. The throttle works fine. It steers straight ahead and the door opens easy. No problems, okay?"

"You can see the warning flags all right?"

"I can see the warning flags," Daggett repeated wearily. "And yes, I checked out the landing pit. It's soft as a tub of marshmallows. Now get back there and start rolling. I've got an important lunch date at the Beverly Hilton."

As Coyle hesitated, a slender woman in a shiny blue raincoat left the small crowd by the camera and walked toward the car. She circled around to the driver's side and leaned down to put her face next to Daggett's.

"Well, what do *you* want?" Daggett snapped.

The woman recoiled slightly at his words. She leaned both hands against the door and spoke in an uneven voice. "I—I didn't want you to go through with this while there's bad feeling between us. After last night, I mean."

"There's been bad feeling between us for months, baby. What's different about today? Do me a favor and get off my back."

"Don't be cruel to me, King, I'm still your wife."

"Yeah, well, that'll change soon enough. Now get out of the way, both of you, and let me go to work."

Fritz Coyle backed away and motioned to the woman. "Come on, June, let's go."

June Daggett leaned forward for a moment to search her husband's face, then she straightened and walked around the car to join Coyle. When they were back behind the camera Coyle gave the order to start filming. He used a walkie-talkie to alert Camera Two at the wooden fence and Camera Three on the beach below the cliff. He circled an arm overhead in the signal for action.

The old Packard leaped forward as Daggett stamped the accelerator and shifted quickly into second. The car gathered momentum as he pulled out and set the hand throttle.

The white car roared down the approach road, across the parking area, through the breakaway fence, and over the edge of the cliff. For an instant the Packard seemed suspended there, straining to fly. Then the nose dipped, and

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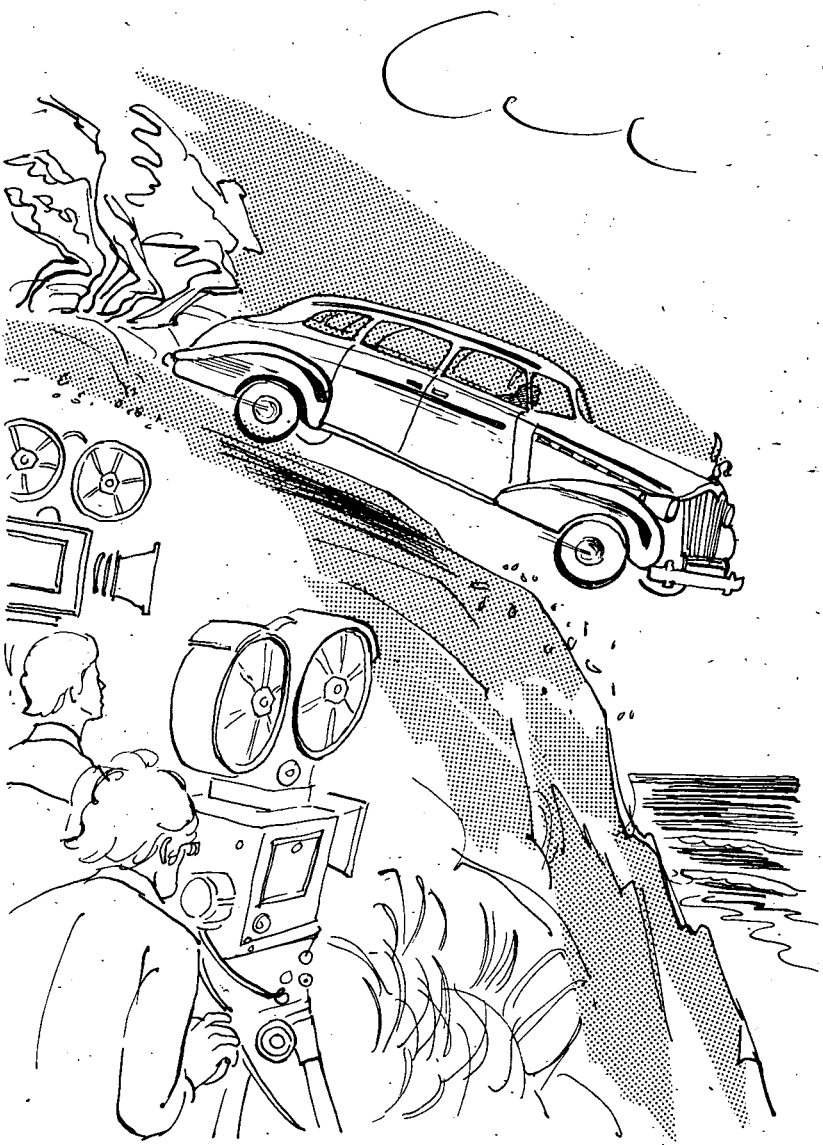

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it plunged toward the rocks below.

Halfway to the bottom the car hit the face of the cliff and exploded with a whoomp of red-orange flames. Now a fiery mass, the Packard arced through space again to burst like a bomb when it hit the boulders at the top of the beach.

For a moment the crew up on the cliff stood frozen. Then they ran toward the edge. Above the gabble of voices a woman cried, "He didn't jump! Oh, he didn't jump!"

Lt. Peter Blaney of the Beach City Police Department watched the coroner's men load the blackened remains of King Daggett into their wagon, then turned back to Fritz Coyle. "You're the director here, is that right, Mr. Coyle?"

"Second-unit director. I do the stunt shots, background, crowd scenes—anything that doesn't have the featured actors in it."

"What was King Daggett doing in this scene?"

"He was doubling for the heavy. This was the finale of the big chase where the bad guy gets wiped out."

"And Daggett was supposed to jump from the car before it went over?"

"That's right. There's a pair of signal flags fifty feet from the edge. At his rate of speed, that gave King a full second to bail out—plenty of time for a good stunt man."

"Would you say Daggett was a good stunt man?"

"He was the best."

"You seem to know a lot about the profession."

"I should. Ten years ago *I* was the best." Coyle tapped his right thigh. "Then this put me on the other side of the camera."

"You hurt your leg in a stunt?" Blaney asked.

"I lost it. I was doing a runaway-wagon gag, and I made a slight miscalculation in leaping from my horse to the team. One of the wheels caught me just above the knee."

"Could Daggett have miscalculated his jump?"

"It's always a possibility. The fiery crash is a showy gag, but it's not all that difficult. All the King had to do was watch for the flags and bail out when they lined up. But it only takes one mistake, and you're a dead man."

"Did you check the position of the flags?"

"Sure. Before and after. They were right where they belonged."

"Why do you think Daggett didn't make it out?"

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"All I can figure is that he panicked for some reason and froze. That doesn't sound like the King, though. He was Mr. Supercool."

"Suppose the door didn't work, could he have gone out the window?"

"He wouldn't have had time. The windows were too small in those old cars for a man to climb through easily."

Blaney strolled a few feet away and stood looking at the charred mass of metal now coated with fire-fighting foam.

"What was it?"

"A thirty-nine Packard four-door. White."

"Any reason why that particular car was used?"

"Because it's different. What we're making here is just one more good-guy-bad-guy action flick. We needed a gimmick to set it apart from a hundred others, so we got an old white Packard. It'll be in all the ads, sort of a trademark."

"The crash sure made a mess of it."

"That was no accident." Coyle made a wry face when he heard his own words. "The car was one big fire bomb. We had napalm packed front and rear to go off on impact."

"Is that standard procedure?"

"Yes. We couldn't depend on luck for the gas tank to blow up. A crash without the fire doesn't make as good a picture."

"I suppose not. How many cameras filmed the crash?"

"Three. Two up on top and one behind you there on the beach."

"Did you get a shot of the car from both sides before it went over?"

"No, just from the right. A camera on the left would have picked up the King bailing out. Also, we needed that side clear so we'd have the sand dunes for a backdrop."

"Then nobody saw the action from the driver's side of the car?"

"No. Well, I did have one man over there to keep sightseers away, but he was told to stay behind the dunes once the filming started."

Blaney rubbed his jaw and stared up at the cliff over which King Daggett had plunged. He recognized the short, sturdy figure of his sergeant, Art Tamasaki, waving down at him. Blaney waved back and turned to the director. "I've got all I can down here. Let's go back up."

They walked a quarter of a mile down the beach to where a path angled up to the parking area. On the way, they passed the crew from the police lab headed down to the smashed car. Blaney

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told them to get as much as they could at the scene and to impound the wreck.

The sun had broken through by the time they reached the top. Sgt. Tamasaki waited there with an attractive woman who carried her raincoat over one arm as the morning heated up.

"This is Mrs. June Daggett," Tamasaki said. "She was the victim's wife."

Fritz Coyle stepped forward to take the woman's arm, and Blaney moved off a short distance with his sergeant.

"What have you got?" Blaney asked.

"The wife and the director both talked to Daggett while he was in the car, just before he went over. They talked to him for less than a minute, then walked back together to the camera."

"There was supposed to be a man in the dunes there on the left of the roadway," Blaney said. "Find him and ask him exactly what he saw. Same thing for the people watching from the other side."

The young man nodded and walked briskly away toward a knot of crew members who stood gazing down at the wreck.

Blaney rejoined Coyle and June Daggett. He said, "Mrs. Daggett, I understand you spoke to your husband just before the accident."

"Yes, I did." The woman's eyes were unreadable.

"May I ask what you said to him?"

Fritz Coyle spoke up quickly. "It was nothing. June only wanted to wish him luck."

Blaney turned deliberately to face the director. "Please let Mrs. Daggett answer for herself."

"Never mind, Fritz," the woman said. "There's no point in hiding anything." She turned to look up at the detective. "King and I had an argument last night. It was a bad one. Our marriage has been going badly for some time. I was afraid that he might be upset today about our fight, and it might affect his timing."

"And was he upset?" Blaney asked.

"Hardly. He couldn't wait to get rid of me."

Coyle jumped in again. "King Daggett was not what you'd call a sweet guy, Lieutenant. On the job he was tops—reflexes like a cat, and utterly fearless. But personally, he was something else. You wouldn't believe the way he treated June."

Blaney studied the two people thoughtfully for a moment, then he saw Tamasaki approaching. "Excuse me while I talk to my partner."

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June Daggett and Coyle stood together, not looking at each other, as Blaney walked across the blacktop.

"I found the guy who was back in the dunes," the sergeant said. "He says Mrs. Daggett came around to the driver's side, leaned down to talk to Daggett for a few seconds, then walked back around to join Coyle. No unusual moves. People on the other side say pretty much the same thing, except that they saw Coyle reach inside the car."

The policemen walked back to where Coyle and June Daggett stood.

Blaney said, "Mr. Coyle, what did you and Daggett talk about just before he took off?"

"Nothing much. I just wanted to make a last-minute check. The King was in a hurry to get back to L.A., and I wanted to be sure he had tested everything. He had, of course. I was more nervous than he was."

"That's all?"

"That's all. Oh, I did reach in to make sure the hand throttle worked. King practically slapped my hand away, but he was right—I was acting like a mother hen."

Blaney said, "I'll be wanting to talk to both of you again. And I'd like to have a look at the film you took today. How soon can it be processed for the department?"

Coyle said, "If it's important I could get a print to you by late this afternoon."

"It's important. You can have it delivered to my office."

The two detectives left Coyle and June Daggett and walked back toward the parked police cars.

"Art, I want you to go into L.A.," Blaney said. "Touch base with the local police, then find out all you can about King Daggett, his wife, and Fritz Coyle. I'll go back to the office and wait for the lab report and the autopsy. When you get the dope, come on back and we'll look at movies."

Tamasaki turned to look up at the taller man. "You don't think King Daggett died by accident, do you, Lieutenant?"

"Sergeant, I'll bet my badge he was murdered by one of those two people back there. All we have to do is find out how it was done and which one did it."

By midafternoon the clouds had burned away, and Beach City basked under a dazzling sun. The sun did not, however, invade Lt. Blaney's office, gloomy now behind drawn blinds. On a portable movie screen, silent images flickered and stopped, flickered and stopped.

"Pete, I'm sorry to say it, but I

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don't think you've got a thing." The speaker was Chief of Police Ed Galan, a tanned, craggy man with cottony white hair.

Blaney stopped the projector on a frame showing the white Packard hurtling toward the cliff. He reversed the projector, backing the car up several feet, then sent it forward again.

"You can see Daggett's head bobbing in there, and his right shoulder comes forward as he turns toward the door." Blaney let the film run on as the car rushed over the edge into its fatal dive. "He was trying to get out, but something stopped him."

"That's conjecture," Galan said. "You told me Daggett tried the door three times just seconds before he took off, and it worked fine."

"That's right, but two people had a chance to do something either to Daggett or to the car to trap him inside. Either his wife or Fritz Coyle killed that man. I can't prove it yet, but I've got a gut feeling that one of them is a murderer."

"Pete, you've been a policeman a long time, and I don't have to tell you that a gut feeling doesn't carry much weight with the district attorney. But I've been a cop long enough myself not to ignore it. Work on it the rest of the week and see if you can come up with some hard evidence. That's the best I can do."

A staccato rap sounded at the door, and Sgt. Tamasaki entered. "Am I in time for the main feature?"

"Have a seat, Art," Blaney said. "I'm just getting to the film from Camera Three, the one down on the beach."

Blaney started the projector, and the screen showed a steep angle shot from the beach up to the top of the cliff. He let the film run as the Packard burst over the edge amid splinters of wood from the barrier. The car plunged downward, hit halfway, exploded in flames, and dived on to the bottom. Blaney reversed the film then, and the fireball gathered itself from the rocks, bounded upward to meet the cliffside where the flames were sucked back in, and the car sailed intact back up over the edge and out of sight.

Again Blaney ran the film, stopping it with the Packard just over the lip of the cliff. He walked up to the screen and traced a finger along the edge of the car as seen from underneath. His finger stopped where there was a slight unevenness in the line.

"What do you make of this?" he asked.

"It's blurred by the motion,"

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Tamasaki said, "but it sure looks like the front door on the driver's side—the escape door—is slightly open."

"That's what I thought," Blaney said. He jumped the film forward, frame by frame, but in its dive the Packard rolled just enough to put the door out of camera range.

Blaney stopped the projector and shot up the blinds, flooding the office with sunlight. "If that door was open," he asked, "why didn't Daggett jump?"

"You've got the rest of the week to answer that," Chief Galan said. "Now I've got to get home to dinner."

When the chief left, Blaney ran the film clips from all three cameras again, but neither he nor Tamasaki saw anything new.

"I've got some interesting news about our people," Tamasaki said. "Did you do any good with the coroner and the lab?"

"Not much. Cause of death was apparently massive head injuries suffered by Daggett on the first impact. The body was badly burned, but there was no sign of any suspicious injuries or wounds that could not have been caused by the crash. No traces of drugs or alcohol in his system. As you saw, there wasn't much left of the car. Everything combustible was burned away down to the bare metal. All four doors were sprung open. As far as the lab people could tell there was no sabotage. They're bringing the wreck in for a microscopic."

"Sounds very clean," Tamasaki said.

"Too clean. What did you get on our friends?"

The sergeant dragged out a leather-covered notebook and referred to it as he spoke. "King Daggett, before he got into the movies, raced cars and motorcycles on the dirt-track circuit. Five years ago he hit Hollywood and Fritz Coyle gave him his first job as a stunt man.

"Fritz Coyle played football at Southern Cal in the late forties. Tried acting, didn't make it, wound up as a stunt man and double for the stars. Lost a leg ten years ago and has had a number of technical jobs since then, finally working his way up to assistant director. People say that's as far as he'll go.

"June Daggett, formerly June Mercer, hung around the fringes of the movie business for a couple of years doing bit parts and being available for parties. Now, here's the interesting part . . . guess who she was married to before King Daggett."

"I give up," Blaney said.

"Fritz Coyle. She married him

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while he was still a top stunt man and Daggett was still pushing bikes in circles."

Blaney sighed heavily. "A real-life soap opera."

"Ain't it the truth. Where do we go from here, Lieutenant?"

"Home. Tomorrow you and I are going into glamorous Hollywood, and I want to get an early start."

"What do we do in the city?"

"I visit the widow and the old friend, and you try to find another 1939 Packard."

Blaney timed the sixty-mile drive north along the coast so they missed the bulk of the rush-hour traffic into Los Angeles. He dropped Tamasaki at the L.A.P.D.'s Hollywood Division and drove to the San Fernando Valley address where the Daggetts had lived.

The house was small, done in California Spanish, with a new yellow sports car in the driveway. Blaney parked behind the car and crossed to the front door. June Daggett answered his ring almost immediately.

"Oh, I thought you might be my friend with the truck," she said.

Blaney stepped into the neat, bright livingroom. Along one wall stood a row of cardboard cartons, each crisscrossed with white plastic clothesline tied in the geometric center.

"You're moving out?" the detective asked.

"Yes. I'm going to stay with friends until I can find an apartment. The sooner I get away from all memories of King, the better."

"What are you going to do with your furniture?"

"My furniture? You sure didn't know King Daggett. Everything I own is in those boxes. All the rest is rented, just like the house. That sofa and chair, the color TV, my washer and dryer, even our bed. To the King, owning anything was too much like putting down roots. He didn't want anything permanent, not even a wife."

"Was this your first marriage, Mrs. Daggett?"

She studied the detective with a faint smile. "By now you will have found out that I was married before, to Fritz Coyle. I suppose you find the situation a bit strange, but that's the way things work in Hollywood."

"Not so strange," Blaney said: "People get married and divorced quite a bit in Beach City, too. I won't hold you up any longer. Is there a phone number where I can reach you later today?"

June Daggett's eyes narrowed a fraction. "Why would you want to

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reach me? The Beach City police seem awfully interested in King's accident."

"Don't you think it's possible that it was no accident?"

"Absolutely not. King Daggett would be the last man in the world to consider suicide. He was too . . . Wait a minute, are you suggesting murder?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't see how it would be possible. There must have been two dozen people watching every move he made from the time he got into the car."

"Yes, that's true. I'll be on my way now if I can have that phone number."

"What? Oh, yes." She borrowed a pen from Blaney and wrote down a number in West Los Angeles. The detective thanked her, walked back to his car, and drove away as she watched from the doorway.

After several calls Blaney located Fritz Coyle, who had the morning off, and arranged to meet him for lunch at a garish Polynesian restaurant on La Cienega. They talked, over sweet-and-sour spareribs, while a simulated tropical rainstorm passed regularly through the dining room.

"All right, Lieutenant," Coyle said halfway through lunch, "you didn't just happen to be in town. What's on your mind?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't think King Daggett's death was an accident."

Coyle's fork hesitated between the plate and his mouth. "Is that so? And do you think somebody killed him? Me, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"I admit I didn't like the man. He was an arrogant, selfish ingrate. But if everybody in this town killed the people they can't stand, we'd be ankle-deep in blood. Am I under suspicion?"

"Not officially, but you don't have to answer any questions."

"Go ahead and ask."

"Why didn't you tell me you had been married to June Daggett?"

Coyle met the policeman's level gaze for several seconds, then his eyes drifted away. "I didn't think it was important, I guess, and would just embarrass June. Plus the fact that it's always been a sore spot with me. I broke the guy into the business, and he thanked me by stealing my wife. Some people thought it was pretty funny at the time."

"How do you feel about her now?"

"Do you mean am I still in love with June? A little. But would I kill a man over her? No way. I

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think you're on the wrong track, Lieutenant. Every stunt man knows that when he works a touchy gag like that one his life is on the line. A hundred different things could have gone wrong for King in that car, no matter how carefully he checked it out. Believe me, it was an accident."

"Maybe so," Blaney said. "Maybe I'm wasting my time and the city's money, but I want to be sure. Is there somewhere I can reach you later today if I need to?"

"I'll be at my office in Burbank the rest of the afternoon. Is it anything special?"

"Maybe nothing," Blaney said. "I'll let you know."

At the Hollywood Division there was a message from Sgt. Tamasaki for Blaney to meet him at Andy's Antique Auto Yard in Culver City. It was just past two o'clock when Blaney pulled into the yard. Automobiles of the past stood about in various states of disrepair. Rusting Model A's stood fender to fender with classic Continentals and forlorn Edsels. Tamasaki stood near the rear of the lot talking to a wiry little man in blue coveralls.

"Lieutenant, this is Andy Vorhees. He owns the place. And there's our car, just behind that LaSalle. The green job there."

Blaney walked over and took a look at the green four-door Packard. It still appeared solid and roadworthy after more than thirty years out of the dealer's showroom.

"Beautiful," Blaney said. "Except for the color, it's identical to the car King Daggett drove over the cliff. Mr. Vorhees, could you move it out to where we've got a little more room?"

"Sure. The engine still runs like a top. I could make you a good deal on this baby since she's not one of the classic models."

"No, thanks." Blaney smiled. "It's all I can do to take care of my own, and it's only three years old."

With a sigh, Vorhees climbed into the Packard and drove it to an empty part of the lot. Blaney walked around the car several times, muttering to himself. He climbed in and out of each of the doors, closing them hard behind him. Standing outside, he leaned down and peered through the front windows, first on one side, then the other. Finally he stood for several minutes, hands clasped behind him, staring at the Packard's left profile. Then his square face broke into a smile, and he smacked one big fist into his open palm.

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Sgt. Tamasaki, who had been watching him, said, "Aren't you supposed to say 'aha' or 'eureka' or something like that?"

Blaney winked at his sergeant and turned to Vorhees. "Is there a hardware store nearby?"

"There's a discount department store up the street. They've got a big hardware section."

"That'll do." Blaney fished in a pocket and came out with two scraps of paper. "Art, call June Daggett and Fritz Coyle at these numbers and get them down here. If they ask why, just say I told you it's vitally important. Tell them you don't know any more than they do."

"That will be easy enough," Tamasaki grumped, "since it's the truth."

The stunt man's widow and the director arrived at the Antique Auto Yard within minutes of each other. They broke off their protests when they saw the old Packard.

"As you see," Blaney said, "this is a duplicate of the car King Daggett drove to his death yesterday. In looking it over, I think I have figured out what happened."

"Get to the point, man," Coyle snapped. "If you've discovered something tell us about it."

"I'd like to demonstrate it," Blaney said. "If you have no objections, I want each of us to act the part of one of the people involved yesterday at the top of the cliff."

When the others remained silent, Blaney went on. "Mr. Coyle, since you are a former stunt man, I'll ask you to get into the car and take the part of King Daggett."

After a short hesitation Coyle slid into the Packard and sat behind the wheel. "Now what?"

"Just follow, as nearly as you can remember, Daggett's actions yesterday morning."

"First he raced the engine several times." Coyle pumped the accelerator. "Then he tested the door like this . . ." With a single smooth motion Coyle hit the inside handle and knocked the door open with his shoulder.

"King followed through with a shoulder roll out onto the ground, but I'll skip that part if you don't mind."

"That's all right," Blaney said. "Now I'll play the part of Mrs. Daggett, and Sgt. Tamasaki will be Mr. Coyle. We will go through the motions that you described to us yesterday, and you can call our attention to anything we do wrong. Mrs. Daggett, I'd like you to stand off to the right there, behind the sergeant. Your point of view will be roughly that of the camera crew."

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June Daggett walked several feet away and stood with her back to a chain link fence.

"That's fine," Blaney said. "Now, Art, you walk up to the car the way Coyle did."

Tamasaki approached the Packard and leaned down to the front window on the passenger's side.

"I said a few words to King," Coyle said, "then reached in to test the hand throttle."

Tamasaki stretched his arm inside and grasped a knob on the dashboard.

"That's the choke," Coyle said, "but you've got the idea. Then King pushed my arm away like this." He thrust Tamasaki's hand away from the instruments.

"Good," Blaney approved. "Then Mrs. Daggett came up and walked around the car to the driver's side as I'm doing, is that right?"

"Yes," June Daggett said quietly. "I talked to King for a few seconds through the window."

Blaney leaned forward with his hands at the base of the open window. "Like this?"

"Yes. Then I walked back around to where Fritz stood, and we went back to the camera together."

Blaney came around the car and walked with Tamasaki over to the fence to stand beside her.

"All right, Mr. Coyle, act out the rest of it, if you will, as Daggett drove toward the cliff."

For a moment Coyle stared at the detective, then he gripped the wheel and focused his gaze out front. His eyes narrowed and followed a pair of imaginary signal flags. Then the ex-stunt man turned slightly on the seat and hit the door handle as he had before. The door jumped open four inches and stopped. For an instant the muscles in Coyle's back bunched in panic. For just one heartbeat it was yesterday morning again, and this was the white Packard diving over the cliff, taking its driver to death.

Then the spell was broken. The detectives walked around the car with June Daggett. They stopped together, all eyes on the loop of smooth white cord pulled taut over the two opposing door handles. Blaney closed the front door and removed the loop as it went slack.

He said, "I couldn't tell yesterday because the car was so badly smashed, but today when I saw those back-to-back door handles it was plain how a loop of cord could hold the door shut. Nobody saw the loop when I walked up to the car because I had it tucked up my sleeve ready to drop over the two handles. The same way you

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hid it in the sleeve of your raincoat yesterday, Mrs. Daggett."

"No, it's not true," she protested, but her voice had gone lifeless.

Blaney went on, "Nobody on the other side of the car could see what you did with your hands, and your body hid the action from the one man on the left. There was no sun to cast a shadow, and when you walked away the white cord was invisible at a distance against the white car.

"Then when Daggett tried to bail out, the door jammed on him and he had no time to react. He was probably still pushing on it when the car went over the edge. That's why the door appeared slightly open in the film shot from below."

June Daggett was crying now. Coyle climbed from the car and stood beside her.

"Don't say anything, June. He's just guessing. There's no evidence."

The woman dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and smiled sadly at Coyle, then at Blaney. "There's no use pretending anymore, Fritz," she said. "I imagine the lieutenant has evidence, or he wouldn't have made the accusation. Isn't that right, Lieutenant?"

Blaney flexed the knotted loop in his hands. "That's right, Mrs. Daggett. This cord is plastic clothesline. The piece you used yesterday burned away in the fire, of course, but the microscopic examination will show traces of cellulose acetate on the door. I still might not have added it up if I hadn't gone to your house today. This type of clothesline is pretty expensive, and not something you would buy to tie up cardboard cartons. And you don't find it around a house with an electric dryer."

June Daggett was in control of herself again. She said, "Right up to the last second I wouldn't have done it if only King had smiled at me or even spoken kindly. But, as always, he chose to be cruel. Stunt men always say they're just one mistake away from death. That cruelty was the King's mistake."

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Ridding oneself of a frustration may be only a temporary panacea.

A Guy Can Get Fed Up

by Arthur Moore

Elinor has been a nag since the day I married her. While we were walking down the aisle she nudged me and said, "Hold your head up. Don't slouch, Fred."

I was putting the suitcases in the trunk of the car. We were about to zip off on our honeymoon. She came out of the house five times to tell me not to forget to put her vanity case on the back seat so she could get at it. "Did you hear me, Fred?"

While we were driving to the lodge in the mountains she said she didn't care for my haircut. "You always let them trim it too close in the back."

I did, too. I like it that way.

Anyway, we've been back from that honeymoon for five years. It seems like forty; every day with the nagging. "Don't forget we've got the bridge party tonight." Or, "Remember the grocery list, Fred." Or, "Did you call about

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my fur?" On and on, year in and year out. Sometimes I run out of the house and bang on the fence. Once at the office one of the clerks told me to remember something or other. For a moment he sounded just like Elinor, so I slugged him in the liver and the whole thing caused a terrible ruckus and I almost got fired. Another time at the beach a guy running a hot-dog stand gave me an Elinor-type comeback and I hauled him over the counter and pounded him.

Jerry, my lawyer, bailed me out and gave me a lecture.

Elinor never got any better. "Don't drop ashes on the rug, Fred." Or, "Do you have to screw your face up that way when you talk?"

She should see *her* face. What a lemon-puss.

One Saturday morning, just as I was settling down to watch the Dodgers and Cards on TV, Elinor came in and complained about the noise. "I can't hear myself think, Fred."

So I hit her with a bookend. A guy can get very damned fed up with nagging. In the first inning, too. She hardly made a sound, just collapsed on the rug in a heap.

After the game I looked at her again, and she was getting cold. I got a beer out of the icebox and thought about it. I shouldn't have hit her . . . not so hard, anyway. It was a warm day and since she was getting cold I figured she was dead. That put me in a bind. She was too big to mail anywhere. She always had been a pain in the neck. Now I was really stuck with her.

So I called Jerry. Him and me went to school together, but he went on to college and is a successful lawyer. He'd know what to do about Elinor. He was always full of advice, like in the past.

"Listen," I said to him on the phone, "I think I've just killed Elinor."

"Don't say anything else," he shouted. "Don't phone anybody. Don't move. Don't do anything!"

He was at the house in a very short time. He is about my size, medium, and dresses better. He has more hair too, and man, he was sore at me. You would think I did it on purpose just to needle him or something. He walked around the body, refused a beer, and I could see he was cudgeling his smarts. He wanted to be sure she was dead, so he turned her over, felt her pulse and shook his head. She was cold as a carp.

He said, "What did you want to go and do a crazy, dumb thing like that for?"

"I got fed up, what else? She's

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been giving me that noise for—"

"You are the dumbest dodo!"

"Lissen," I yelled back at him, "I don't need you for that." I kicked Elinor's kneecap. "What'll I do with her?"

He was disgusted. "You got a terrible temper, Fred, you know that?"

"All right. So I got a temper. Now what?"

Jerry took a couple of deep breaths, scowling at me. Then he walked up and down some more, staring at Elinor, who was getting a kind of marble color that didn't look too bad on her. "All right," he said in a businesslike tone. "You had a fight. You came home and found Elinor on the couch with another guy. We can undress her and—"

"No, we can't."

He put his hands on his hips and blew out his breath. "She's gotta be naked, Fred."

"No. Her mother won't like it."

Jerry snorted. "Who cares? Her mother isn't up for murder. So, okay, we'll leave her panties on."

"I said no—no undressing."

He screamed at me. "You creepy dumbbell! You're in trouble. Very bad, deep trouble. You think just any stupid story will get you off? We've got to figure something the cops will believe!"

I was beginning to get fed up with Jerry. I went out to the kitchen and got another beer.

"And don't get loaded!" he yelled. "This is important. I want you sober."

"I am sober. Make up another story."

"Then shuddup and let me think." He paced some more.

"You want a beer?"

"No, I don't want a beer. I'm trying to think and all you can do is guzzle beer."

"So I never went to college."

"You are a dumbbell. Anybody dumb enough to kill his wife oughta fry. I oughta let you fry, Fred, you know that? For two cents I'd let 'em have you." He looked very disgusted.

He was a pain in the neck. I finished the beer. Then I hit him with the other bookend.

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Sometimes there is no limit to the misfortune one must endure.

The Tragedy at Big Pine

by Richard O. Lewis

"I'm Martin Kingsley," I said, extending my hand to my fellow passenger in the back seat of the station wagon. "Hardware."

He touched my hand briefly and lightly with his own as if fearful that he might become contaminated. "Oliver J. Hetherington here," he said. "Antiques."

His attire was the last word in what a modern, mighty nimrod should wear, and was spanking new. I guessed him to be in his early thirties, but his round, boyish face—which he seemed to be struggling to keep set into firm, masculine lines—looked much younger.

A smile crept to my lips as I remembered my own first experi-

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ence at Big Pine Hunting Lodge. I had come decked out rather nicely, too, only to find that most of the other hunters were in the habit of wearing battered felt hats and hunting clothes that had seen better days. The older the outfit, the more proof that the wearer was an old hand at the game, you see. And then there was old Hank . . .

"You'll find a wonderful bunch of boys at the lodge," I said. "Friendly, companionable—in for a good time."

Oliver J. Hetherington condescended to nod his head.

"You'll meet old Hank, too. He's a real character! Been there for years."

I caught sight of Scotty, our driver, looking at me in his rear-view mirror, and I could tell by the crinkles at the corners of his eyes that he was grinning broadly.

"Sort of a caretaker, handyman, and guide," I went on. "Takes part in all the grouse shoots with an ancient, muzzle-loading shotgun. Claims it's the best gun ever made. Wouldn't part with it for anything in the world. We usually have a lot of fun with him, kidding him about the old relic."

"Fascinating," Oliver J. Hetherington said disinterestedly.

I let it go at that and turned my attention to the darkening landscape of scrub pine through which we were traveling.

We arrived at the lodge well after the supper hour, and the boys, as was customary, were already gathered in the lounge, bodies draped over easy chairs and davenports, coffee and liquors at hand, tobacco smoke trailing toward the rafters. After stowing our gear in our bedroom, a room that Oliver J. and I were to share, we went out and joined the group.

I was acquainted with at least a half dozen of the men from previous hunts, and so I took Oliver J. around and introduced him here and there, exchanged a few ribald pleasantries, drank a number of toasts to good health and good hunting, and—well, you know how it is when a group of fellows get together.

On the eve of the opening of grouse season, it had become more or less a ritual for the boys to clean and inspect their firearms, admire each other's fowling pieces, discuss their merits, do a little bantering and boasting concerning personal prowess, and to lay a few wagers on who would bag the most grouse in the morning and who would excel in the skeet shoot that would be the highlight of the day after.

Some of the guns were newly

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purchased, and Oliver J. Hetherington's gun was definitely one of them. When he uncased it, it was easy to see that it was, indeed, a masterpiece—handcrafted, custom-engraved, a "Gentleman's Shotgun"—and by far the most expensive piece of the entire lot. I saw a few smiles being exchanged between members of the group, and I knew that they had reached the same decision concerning Oliver J. that I had reached during our ride to the lodge in the station wagon.

Most of the hunters, however, had brought along their old standbys, guns that by long usage had become almost sacred. Hank's gun belonged in this latter category. It was obviously of ancient vintage, the kind that could be readied for action only by pouring a goodly quantity of black powder down its throat, ramming the powder home with a half inch of wadding, pouring a palmful of shot on top of that, ramming home more wadding, and then placing a cap on the metal nipple. To fire the thing, one simply cocked the massive hammer, brought the piece to shoulder, pressed the fore trigger which acted as a sort of safety device, then touched the second trigger which released the hammer. The hammer then smacked down on the cap to send flame through the nipple into the firing chamber to explode the powder and blast out the charge of shot—along with a dense cloud of black smoke.

Old Hank himself sat on the floor by the fireplace, concentrating deeply over the process of readying his gun, which consisted mostly of cleaning out the hole in the nipple with a piece of wire, and screwing the nipple back into place again.

He was a wiry, skinny-nosed little guy with ferret-like eyes and—like his gun—of indeterminate age. After cocking the hammer and releasing it a couple of times, he got to his feet and made a few quick practice aims at various imaginary birds. "Best damn gun ever built!" he said, looking belligerently about. "Better'n any of them new-fangled, double-shootin', sissy things they make nowadays!"

"Oh, come!" chided Bill Simms, his fat hulk lolling in an easy chair, a cigar in his mouth, a brandy in one hand. "You couldn't hit the blue sky on a clear day with that old relic!"

Hank raised the gun and made another practice swing. "Could bust a gnat's butt at fifty paces!" he boasted.

"We're not hunting gnats' butts!" guffawed a hunter sitting

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next to Bill, looking at him askance.

"Not fit to eat!" put in another.

Hank narrowed his eyes and screwed up one side of his face. "Twenty bucks says me an' Old Benny here'll bring down more birds 'fore noon tomorrow than any of you!" he challenged.

"Be like taking candy from a kid!" scoffed Bill.

"Better save your money for your old age!" advised another.

After a few more minutes of ribbing, Hank finally shouldered his gun and marched out of the room with as much dignity as he could muster.

Oliver J. Hetherington hadn't taken an active part in the needling, but he had smiled a couple of times as if wanting to, but not knowing how to go about it. He was sound asleep on his cot by the time I lost thirty dollars in a poker game and crawled into mine.

The morning was bright and chill when the eighteen of us, divided into four groups to avoid confusion, took to the field, eager for the hunt, our smoke-sick lungs sucking in the crisp, invigorating air.

Oliver J. was in my group, and we hadn't been out more than a half hour before I realized that he was very fast on the trigger. He shot everything that moved. He was an army in himself, carrying on a one-man war. Whether a grouse was too close or too far away made no difference. Bang! Bang! The near ones fell, lead-heavy. The far ones dived for cover, crippled. In less than three hours, our group had bagged its aggregate limit of grouse for the day, and Oliver J. had brought down most of them—along with two rabbits and a hoot owl.

It was obvious that, given a chance, Oliver J. could walk away with the next day's skeet shoot, be crowned Champ Skeeter, and thereby be treated as royalty for the rest of the week. Yet there was a possibility—and I smiled again—that he might not be taking part in the big event . . .

We were all seated at the long wooden table for noon lunch when old Hank made a triumphant entrance, his gun over one shoulder, a long string of grouse over the other. "All right, wise guys!" he boasted, holding up the heavy string of birds. "Now you see what a really *good* gun can do!"

A half frown wrinkled Oliver J. Hetherington's smooth forehead. His ego had been inflated by the success he and his prize gun had had in the field, but now he

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learned that Hank and his relic had topped his bag by at least two or three birds.

I knew, of course, what old Hank had been up to. He had merely taken out Sandy, the best-trained Irish setter I had ever seen, and had spent a couple hours rounding up all the cripples.

Most of us were tired from the unaccustomed exercise of tramping six or eight miles over rough terrain that morning, but our spirits began to rise in late afternoon in direct relationship to the number of cocktails consumed. By the time we had finished an excellent supper of grouse, along with more liquors, and had gathered again in the lounge to ready our guns for the following day's skeet shoot and pull banal jokes and try to out-brag each other, we were in fine fettle.

Hank was there, as usual, seemingly fortified with enough liquor to make him more boastful than ever. "I told you last night!" he said, prancing around before the fireplace, gun in hand. "Told you I'd fetch more birds than anybody! Shows what a good gun'll do!"

"Let's have a closer look," said Bill Simms, winking slyly at some of us.

Hank strutted over and proffered the ancient piece.

"Much better than I thought," Bill decided, after a brief inspection. "Certainly like to own one just like it. Tell you what." He handed Hank his own double-barreled Winchester. "I'll trade you. Even up."

Hank raised the gun laboriously to his shoulder, made a few clumsy swings with it, and handed it back. "Wouldn't have it!" he stated. "Too heavy! Like tryin' to aim a cannon!"

"How about mine?" Luke Werner, another old-timer, put in. "My gun's got Bill's beat a hundred ways!"

Hank took the gun, gazed down its length, and handed it back. "Barrels curl up at the end," he said. "Wouldn't have it!"

Luke reached for his billfold. "Give you a hundred dollars to boot!" he offered.

"Wouldn't take a thousand to boot!" Hank said, stubbornly shaking his head. "Me an' Old Benny is like Si-mees' twins. Can't be separated nohow!"

"Oh, come, now," Bill needled. "Every man has his price. Hetherington there has a gun that'll knock your eyes out. How about it, Hetherington? Maybe you can make a trade with the old coot."

It was the first time since his arrival at the lodge that Oliver J. had been included in the banter-

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ing. "Sure, I'll trade," he said, eager to win approval in the group. "Why not? I'm always on the lookout for a better piece."

Hank accepted the gun, inspected it gingerly for a moment, and finally shook his head. "Too much filidegree cut into the barrels," he announced. "Weakens 'em. Probably explode one of these days."

"That's the best gun you ever held in your hands, old man," Hetherington said pridefully. "How about it?"

A quick change went over old Hank. He didn't seem to be nearly as drunk as he had a moment before. "All right!" he said, suddenly shoving his old relic into Hetherington's hands. "An even trade! And, young man, you're sure gettin' the best of the bargain!"

Well, you could have heard a pin drop during the next few seconds. It was the moment we had all been waiting for, and we all sat around with cheeks puffed out like toy balloons, ready to go bust. Hetherington stood rigidly mute, as if stunned. His face went white, then a sickly green, and finally a deep scarlet.

I knew exactly how he felt. I had been taken in the same way just three years ago, and with all eyes in the room upon me, it had been impossible to welsh on the deal. I'd had to stand and take it like a man, no matter how much it hurt.

Oliver J. raised the gun, finally, and I thought for a moment that he might crash it to the floor or, worse still, bring it smacking down on old Hank's head—but he didn't. He gazed intently at it for a few seconds, and then the natural color began to come back into his face. "Maybe I did get the best of the bargain, at that," he said softly.

As Hank hurried from the room with his prize, a few guffaws broke out here and there, but for some reason the joke had fallen a bit flat. Maybe it was because of the serious way Oliver J. had inspected the gun before walking off with it to his room.

I was curious, to say the least, and about an hour later I went into our bedroom to find Hetherington sitting on the edge of his cot, the gun across his knees.

"You don't seem very perturbed about losing your gun," I said.

"Do you know what this is?" he said, holding the gun up on the palms of his hands. "It's a Mueller! An authentic Mueller!"

"So?"

"The Mueller shotgun became quite famous more than a hundred years ago because of its accuracy,

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dependability, and excellent craftsmanship. Thus far, only a very few of them have come to light."

I wondered how Oliver J. had been so quick to recognize the make of the gun. Then I remembered that when he had introduced himself to me on the way to the lodge in the station wagon, he had mentioned having something to do with antiques.

"As a collector's item," he went on, "the value of this gun is at least *twice* that of the gun I traded for it!"

I whistled softly as I sank down on the edge of my own cot. To think that I had once had that gun in my hands and then, like an idiot who felt that he had to go along with the joke, had given it back before leaving the lodge! If it hadn't been for my stupidity, I could have beat the conniving Hank at his own game and walked away several thousand dollars richer.

Oliver J. laid the gun carefully aside. "Now what?" he wanted to know. "Will the old coot really keep my gun?"

"Certainly. He kept mine. The same as he has kept all the others he has traded for. Sells them somewhere and rakes off a few thousand extra dollars at it each year."

"But that's dishonest," said Oliver J., frowning. "He's nothing but an old crook."

"Granted," I said. "And someone should put a stop to his underhanded thievery. Guns are expensive and, most times, very dear to the hearts of their owners. But the fellows think it's a great joke, and so they let him get away with his racket year after year."

I hated to tell him the rest of the bad news, but I felt that I had to. "A ceremony will be held at the supper table tomorrow night. The winner of the skeet shoot will be crowned Champ Skeeter, and you, because you lost your gun to Hank, will be dubbed *Chump*. Part of the joke, you see."

"But if I win the shoot tomorrow . . ."

I shook my head. "You won't. No one will lend you a gun or sell you one. No matter how accurate the Mueller is, you wouldn't stand a chance in the doubles with that single-barreled gun. But why worry about it? You're 'way ahead in cash!"

Morosely thoughtful, Oliver J. gazed down at his hands on his knees and began flexing his fingers in a nervous manner. "Money is no object with me," he said, finally. "I guess I've just got a super ego. All my life I've had a driving force—a compulsion, really—to excel in everything I set

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my mind to. And I had my heart set on winning that shoot in the morning . . ."

I nodded my understanding concerning his ego, and I began to feel a bit sorry for him. Oliver J. Hetherington was certainly not a dummy, and I hated to see him being treated as one, but he—well . . .

It was then that I got the brilliant idea, a way to toss the joke back into the very teeth of the jokers and maybe bring old Hank's underhanded tactics to an abrupt halt.

Next morning, Oliver J. Hetherington won the skeet match—both singles and doubles—hands down. At the supper table that evening he was duly, if somewhat reluctantly, crowned Champ Skeeter, amid a few murmurs of dissent.

Before anything could be said concerning who would be dubbed Chump, I got to my feet to claim attention. "It may be a bit unorthodox," I began, "but Mr. Hetherington here won the match fair and square with his own gun. You see, I traded him mine last night, even up." All eyes were upon me as I paused dramatically. "That ancient relic that Hank has been dragging around for the past number of years—" I looked down the table to where Hank was sitting to see how he was going to take the news I was about to unfold, "—just happens to be the most valuable gun ever to appear in this lodge. It is just about worth its weight in gold!"

Complete silence had settled over the room. "In fact," I went on, "the gun is an authentic Mueller! My friend here—" I glanced down at the happy Oliver J. He was sitting in the chair next to mine, his crown of grouse tail feathers tilted over one ear. "—Mr. Champ Skeeter himself and a dealer in antiques, will be glad to tell you something concerning the value of an authentic Mueller!"

Oliver J. looked up at me, a boyish grin on his round face. "Mueller?" he said. "Mueller?" His grin widened. "I'm sorry, my friend," he said, shaking his head, "but I don't recall ever having heard of that make!"

Being crowned Chump once by the boys was regrettable, but being crowned Chump for the *second* time was almost intolerable! I can still hear their silly laughter ringing in my ears.

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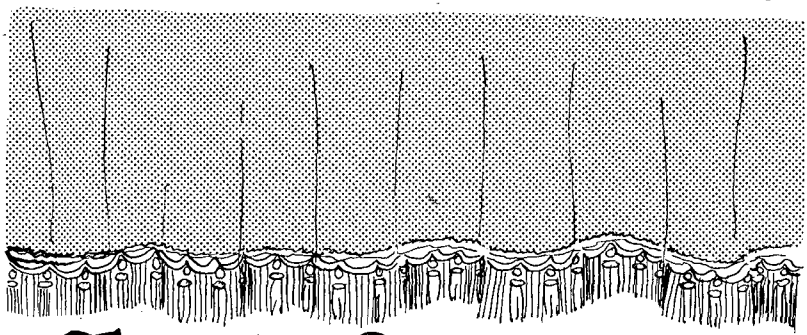
The real test of one's acting ability may prove he doesn't have any.



FINAL CURTAIN

by Stephen Wasylyk

Shakespeare's *Tempest* dragged on wearily, the players going through their lines by rote; emotion and acting long forgotten or never really learned. The performance was bad and Jason Reynolds could understand why the audience was sparse, why this was the last night even though it was only the third of five scheduled performances.

As *Prospero*, he had tried to inject some life into the performance but without succeeding. The company was a sorry collection of older actors like Reynolds, who had eked out a living as a character actor, and young ones who had been picked up throughout the country, the main qualification of both being the low salary for which they would work.

Even at those pay scales, the company had been slowly going broke and they would be lucky to be paid at all after this final performance, giving Reynolds only enough to pay for train fare to New York, where even an actor of limited ability might have a chance of making some sort of a living.

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Left alone on the stage, Reynolds drew a deep breath and faced the audience, fumbling through his final speech:

"As you from crimes would pardoned be . . . Let your indulgence set me free."

He finished with a flourish, thinking wryly that the words were very appropriate for the performance the audience had just witnessed. Ignoring the rest of the cast, he headed toward his dressing room which was an oversized closet in the corner of the weary old theater.

Myra Cady caught up to him. "Another stinker," she said, lip curling. Reynolds wondered how she could judge any performance. Myra was young, with long black hair and a beautifully modeled face, but she had trouble memorizing her lines as *Miranda* and even more difficulty understanding what they meant. She and Reynolds had moved into a cozy, rooming-together relationship he hoped to make more permanent, a dream he knew was as futile as that of becoming famous. Myra would go her own way when she chose, her sojourn with him convenient to her purposes at the moment, because Myra was ambitious and her gentle face hid a personality and a will as hard as her features were soft.

"Have you seen Palestra?" Reynolds asked.

"I haven't seen our producer since the second act."

"Two to one he's gone and our money with him. You had better look."

Her eyes narrowed in the most emotion she had shown in three hours. "You think he'll run out?"

"I would if I were in his shoes," Reynolds said.

She said something very unladylike and ran toward the front of the theater. Even under the heavy gown, her body moved in interesting ways. Reynolds sighed. He would miss her when she decided to leave him.

He was carefully removing his makeup when someone tapped at his door. "It's open," he said irritably.

The man who pushed his way into the small dressing room was as tall as Reynolds, a short brush of a beard clinging to his chin below shaven cheeks. The nose was almost aquiline, the eyes wide-set and pleasant. Reynolds had the feeling he had seen him somewhere and that he knew him well.

"My name is Roy Benedict," the man said. "I'd like to talk to you about a possible job."

Reynolds looked at him closely, the familiarity of the face making him uncomfortable. "You're a pro-

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ducer?" he asked uncertainly.

"Not exactly. I'm a banker."

"Ah. Then you are backing a play."

Benedict's lips flickered with a trace of a smile. "A small one. I need your services for only an hour but I'll pay you five hundred dollars. It will be a solo performance."

Reynolds felt a touch of irritation. "All right," he said. "I don't care what you've heard about actors. Get out."

Benedict laughed. "You have it all wrong. This is a real acting job that calls for a professional. Some of the cast tell me you are leaving for New York tonight. Fine. You will still be there tomorrow."

"Why me?"

"If you look closely into that mirror and imagine yourself with a beard like mine, you'll see the reason."

Reynolds dabbed at his face, glancing up at Benedict over his shoulder, and then it struck him why Benedict looked familiar and he wondered how he could have been so slow. He placed his palms on the dressing table and studied both faces. "We could be brothers," he said slowly.

"Almost twins," Benedict said. "I suppose you could say it proves the theory that everyone has a double somewhere."

Seeing himself duplicated gave Reynolds an unreal feeling. The slight differences weren't important. Benedict's brown hair had a touch of gray at the temples; Reynolds' hair was a bit lighter but still even in color. The biggest difference made Reynolds' mouth twist wryly. Benedict dressed and moved in a reflection of what he obviously was: a successful man. Reynolds knew the long dry years had taken that away from him.

"Just what do you have in mind?" Reynolds asked.

"A practical joke. All you need do is enter a nightclub where I have been invited after this show, join the party for a reasonable time and then leave. That is all there is to it. No more or no less. It is neither dangerous nor illegal and it will probably be the easiest five hundred dollars you ever earned."

"I can't believe that is all there is to it."

"Let the five hundred help ease your curiosity. I have told you there is nothing to fear and you will be in no danger. Are you interested?"

"I'm interested, but not enough to say yes without knowing more."

"I suppose I've misjudged you, then. When I first noticed we looked alike, I thought we shared

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more than a resemblance. I thought we might have similar personalities, enjoy a similar spirit of adventure. An offer like this would appeal to me, for instance. I wouldn't be able to turn it down, but I suppose you are far more timid."

Timid was a word Reynolds had never used in connection with himself. "You should have said cautious."

Benedict shrugged. "Use any word you choose. It comes down to the same thing. You like to play it safe, which is why you became involved with this sorry ensemble. It explains a great deal about you. You don't know how to play a good hand when you draw one." He turned to go.

Reynolds knew Benedict was goading him and he didn't like it. He didn't like Benedict very much either. The man was too smooth, too sure of himself. *Dislike is often the result of envy,* Reynolds thought.

Myra squeezed into the room, eyeing Benedict curiously. "I can't find Palestra," she said. "I guess that potbellied so-and-so is gone."

How long could he keep Myra with little money? Reynolds wondered. Unless he did something, Myra would disappear like Palestra. Benedict's proposition might be a little unusual, but it did mean five hundred dollars, and five hundred dollars meant he could hold Myra for a little while longer.

He turned to Benedict. "You win. Since I don't know you and don't really understand what this is all about, I'll take the five hundred in advance."

"Agreed," Benedict said. He peeled off the bills from a wad held by a jeweled money clip.

"Why is he paying you?" asked Myra, her eyes fixed on the money in Benedict's hand.

"A small role," Reynolds said. "A character part. Nothing to concern you."

"I thought we were leaving for New York tonight."

"We are. The delay will be slight. Go back to the hotel, pack our bags and check out." He handed her the five hundred. "Use this to settle the bill and wait for me in the lobby. We'll catch a later train." He knew that if the thought struck her, she would go her own way and he'd never see her again, but that was a chance he'd have to take.

She took the five hundred hungrily. "If that's what you want, Jason."

He patted her cheek tenderly. "That's what I want."

After she had gone, he turned to Benedict. "Let's have the

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script. Have to learn my lines."

"It's really very simple. I suppose you can make yourself up to look more like me?"

"Very easily."

"Then get started. I'll explain as you work. I am expected to join a small after-theater party. The people there will be my attorney, Robert Huntley; his wife; a young man named Tony Medelin; and the young woman with him named Betsy Taylor. I want you to take my place. You will join them, improvise your way for an hour, make some excuse and leave."

"How do you expect me to improvise? These people know you. They will expect certain answers, certain characteristics . . ."

"The lights will be dim and they will not be looking too closely. Why should they? You know how these things go. All you have to do is make polite conversation. If things get sticky, order a round of drinks. You'll get by. If I didn't think you could do it, I wouldn't ask."

"Describe these people."

Benedict chuckled. "You could call it typecasting. Imagine a bald-headed, fat little man with a white face and a thin moustache and you would have Robert Huntley. If you wanted someone to play the part of a clever attorney, he'd do nicely. His wife Marian is in her forties, acts and dresses twenty years younger. She will make a great deal of inane conversation that requires no comment, only an occasional smile. Tony Medelin is my wife's brother—"

"Hold it," Reynolds said. "Where is your wife? If she—"

Benedict's mouth twisted. "No need for concern. My wife is an invalid. She's at home. Let me continue. Medelin is young, with long black hair and a bony face behind a beard that could do with a good trimming. Betsy Taylor could play the part of the blonde ingenue in any play ever written. They are stereotyped people. You've met hundreds like them. Do you get the picture?"

"You make it rather clear." Reynolds finished powdering his hair to match Benedict's and fingered through his makeup kit for a beard. "Now, just what do you people talk about?"

"The things that everyone else does. Nothing in particular. If you don't know what to say, keep quiet and smile, which is generally what I do." He examined Reynolds critically. "That beard looks fine. If it satisfies me, it will fool them. Are you ready? I wouldn't want them to wait too long."

"What excuse did you give for

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not going along when the play was over?"

"I told them that one of the men in the cast looked familiar and I was going backstage to check. Simply say it was a mistake but that you spent a little time talking." He watched Reynolds slip into his jacket. "It's fortunate that we're both wearing dark suits. The slightly different pattern won't be noticeable but you need just one touch." He fumbled his tie loose and handed it to Reynolds. "Wear this."

Reynolds knotted the tie and looked into the mirror. At first his resemblance to Benedict had been superficial but what he saw in the mirror jarred him. They could now pass for identical twins and he thought that Benedict must have really had a sharp eye to know what makeup could do. The man standing beside him was clever, perhaps more clever than he realized.

"All right," he said. "I'll try to earn the money you paid me. Where is this nightclub?"

"Not far. I'll drive you there. I think it best that we not be seen together, so I'll go first and meet you in the alley behind the theater. Give me ten minutes."

Reynolds nodded and reached for a cigarette. Benedict looked at the pack and shook his head. "Not those." He handed Reynolds three cigars. "Use these."

Reynolds grinned. They had caught his first mistake. He wondered how many others he would make that would slip by. The chances of the masquerade succeeding seemed to be slim, but it was Benedict's money.

He puffed at the cigar appreciatively. Benedict had good taste, but then he looked like he could afford it.

Reynolds wondered if Myra would be waiting at the hotel and decided that she probably would. She would stay with him until someone better came along and that wasn't likely to happen in the next hour or two. He was honest enough with himself to realize she was his one last fling before old age set in, an attempt to prove he was still young and vital enough to hold an attractive young woman, but he wasn't sure his attraction to her wasn't tinged with love. Reynolds didn't want that. Love would give her a hold on him and make things more difficult when she left.

He walked out through the empty theater with the feeling he was walking into more than he could handle. He squared his shoulders. For five hundred dollars and Myra, he could handle anything.

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Benedict was waiting behind the wheel of a big car. Reynolds climbed in beside him. "Two questions have occurred to me," he said.

"Go ahead," Benedict said.

"What's your favorite drink?"

"Bourbon and water."

Reynolds grimaced. "I prefer Scotch."

"Suffer. What's the other question?" Benedict asked.

"Who picks up the bill?"

"It's Huntley's party."

"Good," Reynolds said. "If I were to be expected to pay, you would have to provide the money. I don't have enough of my own to cover one round."

Benedict grinned. "You could always sign my name to the check. I have an account there." He pulled up a short distance from a lighted marquee. "There it is. The headwaiter's name is Angelo. Ask him for Mr. Huntley's table. He'll take you right to it."

"I won't see you again?"

"I see no reason for that."

"I thought that to make the joke effective, you'd eventually walk in."

"That will not be the punch line. The humor of the situation will not be apparent until tomorrow."

"I don't believe this is a practical joke at all. Just what are you going to do while I'm in there? Where will you be? For all I know you could be robbing your own bank."

"If I wanted to do that, I wouldn't need you."

"I don't know." Reynolds placed a hand on the car door. "It suddenly occurs to me that I'm crazy to do something like this without really knowing why. If you want me to go through with it, you'll have to give me a good reason."

Benedict hesitated. "All right, I'll tell you. There is the apartment of a very attractive young lady not far from here . . ."

"Ah," said Reynolds, grinning, "now that's something I understand. She must be quite a woman if a visit is worth five hundred dollars. Couldn't you arrange to see her without involving me?"

"I wish I could." Benedict became pensive. "I told you my wife is an invalid. She's paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair. Her brother seems to feel she requires his watchdog protection, so he keeps a sharp eye on me."

Reynolds shrugged. "So what?"

"He's just looking for an excuse for his sister to divorce me. I don't intend to give him that opening."

Reynolds shifted in the seat.

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"That can hardly be a big tragedy. Surely if she wants to get rid of you it can be no great loss. At least you'll be free to see as many young women as you want."

"It isn't that simple. My wife controls all the money. I even owe my position at the bank to her. If she divorces me, I won't have a dime."

"Money can't be that important."

"It is to me."

"More important than the young woman?"

Benedict's teeth flashed in the darkness. "I'd like to keep them both. Now, you'd better get in there. I'd appreciate about an hour."

"I'll do what I can," Reynolds said. "Enjoy yourself and give my compliments to the young lady."

Walking toward the door of the club, Reynolds took a deep breath, held it for a few steps, and let it out slowly as he always did when waiting for his cue. The whole thing made sense now. Benedict wanted to spend an hour with some young woman without anyone knowing and was willing to pay five hundred dollars for the time. Fine. Reynolds was glad to accommodate him because Benedict's troubles with his wife and brother-in-law were no concern of his.

He would be last to sit in judgment. When it came down to it, hadn't he done practically the same as Benedict by turning the five hundred over to Myra? Wasn't he really buying a woman's time, just as Benedict was?

He tugged open the door of the club, stepped into a small lobby, smiled at the hat-check girl and headed for the dining room.

A small man, slim and erect, with carefully brushed silver hair and a swarthy face, intercepted him. "Good evening, Mr. Benedict."

Reynolds took a chance. "Good evening, Angelo. I'm looking for Mr. Huntley's table."

"Follow me," Angelo said.

He led Reynolds to a corner of the room. There was no mistaking the four people at the table for anyone but Benedict's friends, even if the man named Huntley hadn't risen and held out his hand.

"Where have you been, Roy? We've been waiting for you."

"Talking," Reynolds said. He slid into a chair.

The waiter appeared at his elbow. "Bourbon and water," Reynolds said. He looked around the table and smiled. The two women smiled back. Medelin frowned. Reynolds' heart froze for a moment. *Attack*, he thought. *Don't*

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let him have the initiative.

"Something wrong, Tony?" he asked.

"Nothing more than usual, and don't try to make this a pleasant meeting. It was arranged by your attorney to smooth over our differences. It won't do any good."

"No call to be unpleasant," Huntley interjected. "We're here to enjoy ourselves."

"Yes," said Marian Huntley. "Let's enjoy ourselves."

Reynolds leaned back with the feeling there was a volcano bubbling and it wouldn't take much to cause it to erupt. Huntley smiled at him. Reynolds smiled back. It was Mrs. Huntley who eased the tension. "The play was awful, wasn't it?" she asked.

Reynolds almost blurted out a defense before he remembered he was supposed to be Benedict. "It was bad," he agreed.

The conversation shifted to the state of the theater, with Mrs. Huntley babbling on. Tony Medelin was showing an extraordinary liking for Scotch; Huntley and Reynolds were sipping their drinks slowly.

Reynolds tried to classify the people at the table, deciding he had nothing to fear from anyone except Medelin, who made no effort to hide his dislike of Benedict.

Reynolds was toying with his second drink when he realized that Benedict's hour was almost up. *I'll give him five more minutes,* he told himself.

Medelin made him regret his decision. He leaned forward, his voice belligerent. "You just never learn, do you, Benedict?"

Reynolds almost dropped his glass before he realized Medelin had called him Benedict. He said nothing.

"You were drinking that night just like you're drinking now. That's why you had that accident. That's why my sister is in a wheelchair for the rest of her life."

"That is all past," Huntley said. "I thought we were going to forget it. It was an accident. It could have happened to anyone."

"She wanted to drive. He wouldn't let her. That makes him responsible."

Huntley sighed. "We've gone over it many times. Roy is sorrier than anyone that it happened."

Medelin half rose, leaning over the table. "Sorry? He would have preferred that she died so that he could inherit her money. He would still like to see that happen."

"You've had too much to drink," Huntley said disgustedly.

"Have I? You'll notice he's say-

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ing nothing. He has no rebuttal."

Reynolds cleared his throat and looked at Huntley. Huntley shook his head.

Medelin lifted a warning finger toward Reynolds. "I'll be watching you, Benedict. My sister can't do that, but I can."

Reynolds stood up. "I think it is time to leave."

Huntley and his wife joined him when he moved away from the table. "Don't let him bother you, Roy. I thought he'd loosen up a little, that we could talk to him, but I hadn't counted on his having too many drinks."

Reynolds felt he had to say something. "I won't let him bother me." It was certainly no lie. He had no interest in any trouble that Medelin might cause Benedict. His end of the deal was almost through. He smiled and reached for one of Benedict's cigars, hoping that Benedict had enjoyed his time with the young woman.

"Why are you smiling?" asked Marian Huntley. "I don't think that Tony Medelin is anyone to laugh about. I think he's a sick young man. His relationship with his sister has always struck me as being a little unhealthy, even if she did raise him after their parents died. Then this accident business. As far as I'm concerned, he's dangerous. He really needs a psychiatrist. If I were you, Roy, I would be afraid of him."

Reynolds didn't want to become involved in any amateur analysis at this stage. "I am smiling," he said, "because it was supposed to be your party, but Medelin is stuck with the bill."

Huntley chuckled. "The Medelin family can afford it."

Reynolds held out his hand. "Thanks for trying, anyway. I'll be in touch."

"Lunch this week?"

"Call me," said Reynolds, thinking that so far he had ad-libbed a magnificent performance and that he'd better quit while he was ahead. "Good night," he added.

He watched them cross the street, enter their car and drive away, and he puffed on the cigar until they were out of sight.

He threw the cigar into the gutter and strode toward the hotel with the feeling that a car had been started somewhere in the darkness and had slipped away into the night.

Myra wasn't waiting in the lobby.

He let the disappointment sink in before casually walking by the desk and noticing that the key to his room was gone. She might still be upstairs.

The elevator moved much too

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slowly. He waited impatiently.

Myra opened the door to his knock, squealed and hugged him like a little girl whose father had just come home. "How did it go?"

"Fine. Why didn't you check out?"

"Listen," she said, "do you realize they would charge us for a whole day if we checked out now? *A whole day!* I wasn't going to stand for that. We'll stay until eleven tomorrow when we're supposed to get out. If we went to New York now, we'd have to pay for another hotel room. Why should we do that when we already have one? There's no reason to rush. There is nothing we can do in the morning that we can't do later."

Reynolds laughed. Only Myra would think of something like that. Not that he minded. He hadn't been looking forward to a train ride at this hour.

"Okay," he said. "We'll stay." He kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the bed. "It was a very interesting evening."

She settled beside him. "Tell me, but get rid of that silly beard first."

Reynolds tugged off the beard as he told her.

"All this for just an hour with a girl?" she asked.

"It looks that way."

"Would you do that for me?"

"I'd do more," Reynolds said. "I'd pay a thousand dollars for an hour with you."

She giggled. "Maybe I'm in the wrong business."

Reynolds pulled her close. "Maybe you are, but right now *I'm* your business."

Reynolds fell asleep finally, thankful she had stayed with him for a while longer, hopeful that she wouldn't find an excuse to leave for a long time.

They were up early and ordered breakfast sent to the room. Reynolds, waiting for Myra to join him, picked up the morning newspaper from the tray and flipped to the theater section first for the review of last night's performance, finding only a short paragraph that he wished he hadn't read and that he certainly didn't want to save for his scrapbook.

He scanned the rest of the paper.

The article was buried in a corner in the metropolitan section alongside a department store ad.

Invalid Woman Killed . . . Mrs. Cornelia Benedict, 37, was found shot to death early this morning in the livingroom of her home. Her body was discovered by her husband, Roy, when he returned after visiting the theater. The condition of the home, on exclusive Lincoln

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Drive, led police to theorize that Mrs. Benedict was killed by an intruder who had intended to burglarize the house. An investigation is under way.

Reynolds knew the item had been a last-minute filler in the later editions of the paper, dropped in because it was breaking news and before the story had really developed.

Benedict wouldn't have to worry about his wife divorcing him now or about coming up with ways to visit young women undetected. Whoever had killed his wife had done him a big favor.

Whoever had killed his wife.

Reynolds felt a little chill. The killing had been very convenient for Benedict. Suppose there had been no visit to a young woman? Suppose Benedict had used that hour to go to his home and kill his wife, pretending to find her later? The police would have a difficult time proving it for one very simple reason: Reynolds had given him a perfect alibi.

Reynolds felt his stomach churn, and the breakfast on the tray was suddenly cold and unappetizing. Benedict had used him, made a fool of him. There had been no young woman. Benedict had fed him that story and he had bought it like a vaudeville country boy on his first visit to the big city, that five hundred dollars floating before his eyes like a beckoning blonde.

Benedict never expected him to see that item in the paper. He thought that Reynolds would be far out of town when the news broke, but he couldn't have anticipated Myra's parsimonious attitude toward hotels. Reading about the murder was an accident, a long-odds risk Benedict had almost won.

Myra came into the room, stopping short when she saw his face. "Don't you feel well?"

"Not well at all."

She slid into his lap. "Tell me," she cooed.

"I just found out why I was hired." As he explained, her soft round face changed from interest, to shock, to a lip-narrowed calculating shrewdness, and then to a glitter in the eyes Reynolds couldn't quite identify.

"He should have paid more than five hundred for that," she said.

"I'm going to the police. They can't prove anything unless I tell them that Benedict wasn't in that nightclub."

Her arms tightened around his neck. "No, I don't think that's the way to handle it. You might get into trouble."

"I was innocent. I didn't know

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what he was up to," he protested.

"The police will find that hard to believe. Now listen. What do we care what he did or about that dumb wife of his? Maybe she deserved it. But I don't think he should be allowed to get away with paying you only five hundred dollars. I think you should call him and tell him you want a lot more."

"I'm not a blackmailer," Reynolds protested.

"You can be anything you want to be. Consider it just another character part that will pay very well."

"No," Reynolds said.

She slid off his lap. "Then I'll do it. And you can get out. I'll do it alone."

Reynolds looked at her, realizing finally that he loved her and he couldn't face the thought of going on without her. He felt a touch of anger about the way Benedict had used him. She had a point. Benedict had paid him to give a performance, not to keep quiet about it. His silence should be worth a great deal of money.

"All right," he said. "We won't go to New York today. Suppose I call him and see what he has to say."

"I know what he'll say. He'll say what any sensible man will say." The glitter was brighter in her eyes, her greed shining through.

The number was easy to find in the phone book and in a few minutes Reynolds could hear a phone buzzing. It rang a half dozen times before Benedict answered crisply. "Roy Benedict here."

"Jason Reynolds here," Reynolds mimicked.

In the silence, Reynolds could hear small noises on the phone.

"I thought you would be in New York by now," Benedict said.

"I was delayed. Since I'm still in town, I think we should get together."

"I'll be seeing no one for a few days."

"If you don't see me now, you won't be seeing anyone for a long time."

"I don't owe you a thing. You were paid."

"I was paid for a performance. I am interested in the residuals from that performance. You will be getting continuing benefits. I expect you to share them."

There was another silence.

"All right, but you'll have to wait."

"No," Reynolds said. "You can be here in less than two hours along with five thousand dollars."

"I don't have that kind of money available."

"Certainly you do. You're in the banking business, remember?"

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Silence again on the line.

"Where are you?" Benedict asked.

Reynolds told him. "I'll be waiting. If you're not here in two hours, it will be simple enough to call the police."

"Just keep cool. I'll be there."

Reynolds hung up, smiling. It had been easy.

"You handled that well," Myra said. "He'll bring the money?"

Grinning, Reynolds took her hands and danced around her, his feet moving in an improvised jig. "He will."

She joined him before they collapsed across the bed, laughing. "We'll go to New York in style."

"First class all the way," Reynolds said. "Now, let's have breakfast. My appetite just came back."

Benedict tapped at the door two nervous hours later. Reynolds let him in.

"I could ask how you are," he said, "but I see little point in small talk. Did you bring the money?"

Benedict nodded. "Before we get to that, I'd like to ask a question. Will this be your final request or do you intend to bleed me dry?"

Reynolds chuckled. "You said I didn't know how to play a good hand when I drew one. I think you know better now."

"That's what I thought," Benedict said slowly. "I would have been willing to pay you the five thousand if that were the end of it. I don't intend to have you hanging around my neck for years." His hand slipped into his jacket and came out holding a gun.

Reynolds felt as though his heart had stopped. "What's that for?"

Benedict quietly fastened what appeared to be a small tube to the barrel of the gun. "You know I've committed one murder today. I never anticipated the need for another until you called, but I see no reason why I should hesitate. I have nothing to lose and a great deal to gain." He leveled the gun at Reynolds' chest. "I regret the young lady's presence. She's done nothing to deserve this except to associate herself with you, but she should have known better than to take up with a loser."

For one wild moment, Reynolds had the feeling that all Benedict was trying to do was frighten them, but Benedict looked too serious to be playing games. In one second, two perhaps, Benedict would shoot. Reynolds leaped, his hands stretching out desperately for the gun. He caught Benedict's wrist. The gun went off with a little popping sound. Benedict's

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arm strained, trying to point the gun at Reynolds. Reynolds twisted and tugged. They collided, Benedict losing his balance and falling, dragging Reynolds with him. The gun went off again, the sound muffled now, almost like a subdued cough.

Beneath him, Reynolds felt Benedict stiffen, then relax. He cautiously pulled himself away, leaving Benedict on the floor. Benedict's eyes fixed on Reynolds in wide surprise before they grew blank and the muscles of his face slackened and his jaw opened slightly.

Reynolds stared down at Benedict.

"What are you going to do now?" Myra's voice had an edge to it, a subtle challenge.

"I don't know," Reynolds said. "I don't know what to do."

"You can't report it to the police."

"He intended to kill us both."

"Because you were blackmailing him."

"We'll leave. We'll just leave him here."

"In this room? We signed the register, remember? They'll come looking for us. You'll have to get him out of here."

"Where? What can I do with him? I don't know anything about these things. I—"

"Shut up and let me think." She began to pace the room with a menacing feline grace, suddenly far older and wiser than Reynolds would ever be. He felt like a small boy waiting for his mother to tell him what to do. "I doubt if anyone saw him come in here. He would have made sure of that. If we can put him somewhere else . . ." She stopped. "Do you still have that beard you wore last night?"

"Yes."

"Good. Get it on. Take his identification from his pockets and go down to the registration desk. Rent a room under his name on this floor. No one will know you aren't the real Benedict. We'll put his body in that room so that the police will think he was killed there. We'll let them worry about who killed him and why, while we check out and go our way. There will be nothing to connect us."

Reynolds let her words sink in, wondering how she could think so fast and plan so well with the body on the floor.

She stooped and went through Benedict's pockets. His jacket held a thick white envelope. She opened it. "He was telling the truth. He did bring the five thousand." She found his wallet and tossed it at Reynolds. "Take this.

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Make sure you show it when you register."

"I can't," Reynolds said. "It won't work."

"You can and it will," she snapped. "You always told me you were very strong on bit characters. Now prove it. Put on that beard."

His hair still retained some of the graying powder from the night before. All he needed was the beard. Hands trembling, he fastened it in place.

Myra looked from him to the body on the floor and shuddered. She whispered, "You look like his ghost. I wouldn't have thought the beard could make that much difference." Her voice leveled. "Now go to the desk and register. It will be just another little acting job and you're good at those."

Reynolds opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

A figure stepped forward in the carpeted passage, a tall, familiar bearded figure with long black hair and a revolver in one hand.

"You lousy crumb, Benedict," Medelin said quietly. "Something told me to follow you. My sister dies last night, her body isn't even cold yet and I find you here in a crummy hotel with another woman. What kind of freak are you?"

Reynolds held out a hand, palm outward as if he could push the man away. He lifted the other to dust away the powder at his temple, to show Medelin something, anything, to prove he wasn't Benedict. "No," he said. "I'm not . . ."

Medelin hadn't come to talk. Somewhere, sometime, someone had taught him how to handle a handgun. He crouched, feet apart and well balanced, the gun thrust forward, one hand supporting the butt, and he fired, tracking Reynolds' collapsing body deliberately with one shot after another until the gun was empty.

"You lousy crumb," said Medelin. "You always were a phony, pretending that you loved my sister when all you wanted was her money. I told her that. I told her that a hundred times. I can tell a bad actor when I see one."

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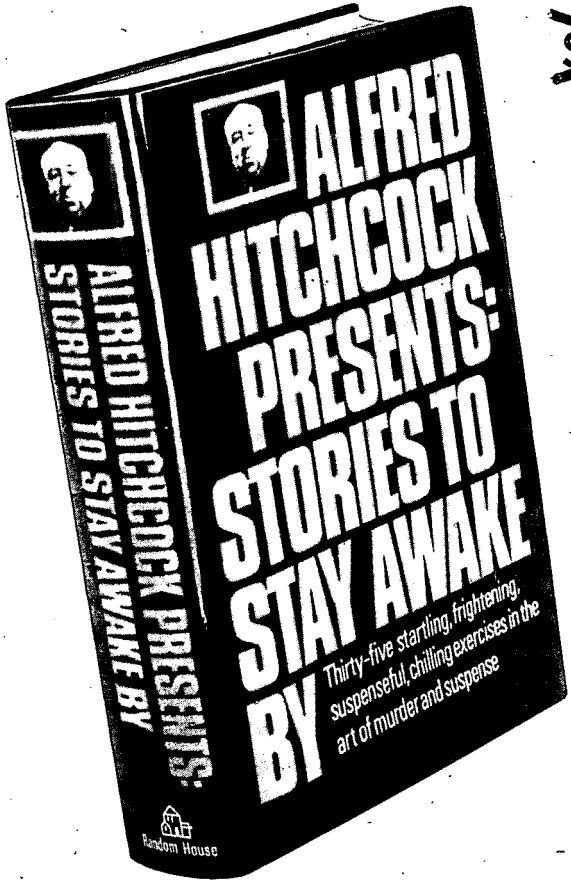
WHILE THEY LAST

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER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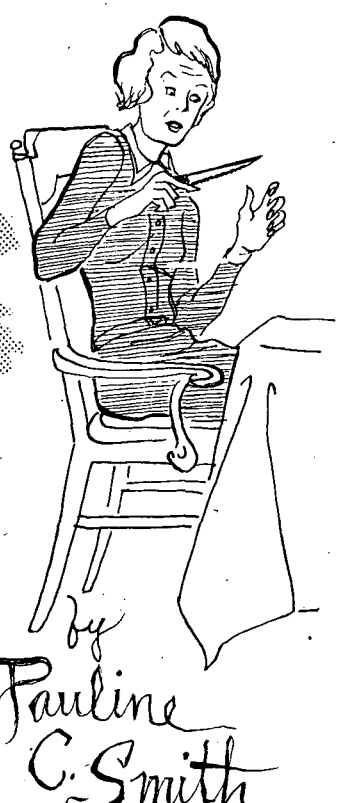
To be, or not to be: that is The Question.

The Question



by Pauline C. Smith

I don't know how long it has been that I have felt like this. I guess since Larry finished college and went halfway across the country to work, and with Joanie two states away starting her family. Here I am, alone with Ed, whom I haven't really known during these twenty-five years.

Maybe he has changed with the years, but I don't think so. I think it is our times that have changed—

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and semantics, so that Ed, who might once have been termed only firmly autocratic must now be called a chauvinistic pig. I repeat the phrase to myself and discover that it fits him like a glove—a pigskin glove. Not that he is exactly fat, but more that he is paunchy with an important girth that he tends to pat with self-satisfied contentment.

Was he ever slim and uncertain? Well, I doubt it. His maleness must have always blown him up with superiority and assurance.

I don't seem to remember much from these twenty-five years. There were the two children, a boy and a girl—Ed must have decreed it so: the boy first, then the girl *and no more;* and I followed the rules, as I always followed them, blindly, mindlessly. I don't even seem to remember too much about the children once they started growing up. Oh, of course there were the girl scout and boy scout badges to be sewn on, but what I remember best are the teething days and the diapers—*they needed me then.* I could hold them in my arms.

The house is empty. Maybe that is why I am so aware of Ed. There are no diapers or new teeth or scout badges to put my mind on, so I see Ed, the pig, patting his paunch in chauvinistic self-approval, and I wonder about the years, the past dim years with nothing outstanding enough for memory unless you count scout badges, diapers and teething.

I look at him curiously across the dining table that he selected, eating the food that he drove me to the supermarket to shop for, eating with selfish attention, filling up the paunch in silence; no dinner conversation; no comment at all unless the steak might be underdone or overdone.

I feel an anonymity and look down at my hand that holds the steak knife—seeing it, so it must be there—touching my forefinger to my thumb on the knife handle, feeling the pressure, so I have substance. But still I am anonymous, being me only to myself. To Ed, I suppose I am a washing machine, a stove, a vacuum cleaner . . . which is really quite sad. It is sad, also, to think back upon all the dim years with their few bright badge days, and the diapers and teething, and realize how very dim they have been. To realize at last and with shock!

During the day, if I am at my window or in the garden, I see the women of the neighborhood as they drive their cars out of their driveways and sail down the street, alert and alive, doing their thing. It isn't necessary for them

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to touch fingers on the steering wheel to make sure of themselves. They *know* they are there!

I wonder, then, how it is and why it is.

Are they not married to chauvinist pigs, or did they not knuckle and so make chauvinist pigs of their husbands? This is a tangled thought that I must unravel—but it does prove one thing: I am beginning to have thoughts—thoughts of my own—which is some kind of progress.

I watch Ed across his table from me, and he doesn't know, after twenty-five years, that I am here, and doesn't know that I am thinking thoughts; he cuts his steak that is neither overdone nor underdone, therefore deserving of no comment. I watch him and I think my tangled thoughts. Had I, in my anonymity, made of him a chauvinistic pig; or had he, the chauvinistic pig, made me anonymous?

I would ask him that question, for he has always given me the answers—but I don't question him since his answers have always been given without the questions being asked.

I should have learned to drive. Had I learned how to drive a car, I might have more to remember than diapers, teeth and badges. I might have PTA meetings and shopping at the supermarket in lofty independence. I wonder why I never learned to drive? Was it because I was a nonentity from the beginning, or that Ed made me into one who never thought of driving a car?

These thoughts are giving me a headache and the knuckles of my hand on the steak knife are white.

If I could only remember a single definite deed I have done, an overt act committed, a positive decision made through these dim and uneventful years—a reason for being, for having been; other than, of course, to change diapers, rub inflamed gums and sew on badges for such a short time—well, then, the past years might not seem so dim and uneventful.

But there they are, stretched out behind me like spools of gray cotton thread, dull and apathetic.

Ed is chewing his steak, strong, white teeth grinding the meat, never realizing that I am not a washing machine or a vacuum cleaner, but a spool of cotton thread suddenly colorful with thoughts.

Would he continue to chew so steadily and with such contentment should I raise this steak knife, twist my wrist and plunge it into my heart? I would like to ask him that question, but I never ask questions, so he chews without

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seeing me and without giving answer to the question I do not ask.

I raise the steak knife and look at it and feel the tips of my fingers touching each other upon its handle, and know with great certainty that should I plunge it into my anonymous heart, I would simply disappear because I am here only for me; and Ed would continue to chew his meat with powerful white teeth without knowing that I was gone.

Now, a new and startling question upon the old question poses itself in my mind: if it were Ed who had made of me an anonym through his chauvinism so that I would *disappear* with a knife in *my* heart, might it not be logical to assume that, should it have been I instead who, through my anonymity, made of him the chauvinist, I would *appear* if the knife were in *his* heart?

This is a question I cannot ask because the answers have always been given to me without the questions.

Ed chews, powerfully white, and I touch the tips of my fingers around the handle of the knife, feeling the pressure, but only slightly. I stand while Ed chews the steak without comment because it is neither underdone nor overdone, but just right.

I walk around the Ed-selected dining table. He does not notice because I am a vacuum cleaner, a stove or a washing machine.

He cuts and he chews in chauvinistic self-satisfaction.

I raise my arm, the knife blade gleams. I *feel* the polished handle. I feel it on my fingers. I arc the blow and plunge the blade into his heart.

He stops chewing in mid-teeth. His head drops forward. He tumbles untidily to the floor.

I kneel then, and look down upon the firm face that I have killed to laxity, with the open, steely eyes dead in childish wonder; and I touch the tips of my fingers together on the handle of the knife and feel nothing . . .

Now I have nobody that I cannot question, and nobody from whom I can get the answers to the questions I do not ask.

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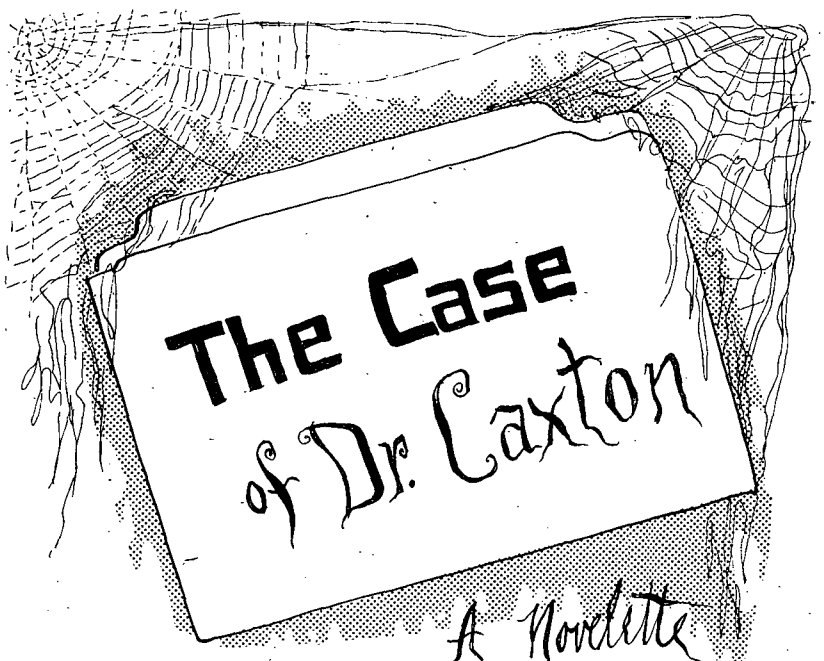
Facing up to one's loss may be more difficult than the eventual replacement.



A young maid in a crisp white smock opened the door.

"I'm here to see Miss Alexander," I said.

"Mr. Pilgrim?"

"Right."

"She waitin' on you."

I followed the shapely lass through the large foyer. We proceeded along a broad hallway over thick golden carpet. On either wall was a full-length mirror in ornate gilt frame. I caught a glimpse of a tastefully decorated livingroom through an open door;

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through another I saw the afternoon sunlight spreading a rich sheen on tall mahogany bookshelves and their contents.

For a spinster, quite an expansive layout, I thought.

We ascended a dramatic staircase and moved along another hallway slightly smaller than the one below. We passed five closed doors in approaching an open one facing us.

This room proved to be what home-decorating magazines call a bed-sitting. The twin-sized bed, tucked into an alcove, was camouflaged under a black-embroidered white coverlet and a crimson bolster. Nearby, a bowl of flowers stood on a lacquered table. Also present were several feminine chairs, a very modern-looking desk, a dressing table apparently contrived almost entirely of glass and, of course, Miss Alexander. As we entered she turned from a great bay window.

"Mr. Pilgrim, ma'am," the maid said.

"So I suspected," Miss Alexander said. "Thank you, Aggie."

"You be wantin' tea?"

Miss Alexander arched her beautiful dark eyebrows toward me.

"If it's the custom of the house, count me in," I said.

Aggie left. Miss Alexander half-turned to the bay window, which overlooked a formal garden, as if unwilling to get down to business immediately.

I judged her to be no older than thirty-six, but her black hair was already threaded with gray. Her face in profile was a beautiful combination of fragility and firmness, reminding me at that instant of translucent porcelain. It was the sort of face that would retain a delicate loveliness well into old age. I wondered why she had never married.

Finally she took a tentative position on the edge of the window seat. "Please sit down, Mr. Pilgrim."

I selected a brocaded chair that looked rugged enough.

"You come highly recommended," she continued, assessing me with her frank blue eyes.

"By whom?"

"Frederick Wayne."

"Your attorney?"

"Yes, one of them. My favorite. He says you are one of the most competent private investigators in the business."

"Nice of Fred. I'll put him on my Christmas-card list."

She remained nervously silent for nearly a minute, as if wondering just where to begin. At last she said, "Five years ago I was engaged to marry a man named

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Wilmarth Caxton. Two weeks before the day of our wedding he disappeared and nobody has ever seen him since. It's regarding this matter, Mr. Pilgrim, that I've summoned you here."

"A little late in the day, isn't it?"

"I quite agree. The police covered the ground most thoroughly, I'm sure, at the time of Dr. Caxton's disappearance, but now something else has—"

"*Dr.* Caxton. Of course. It was front-page news."

"An extremely distressing time for me, Mr. Pilgrim. It took me months to face the fact that Wilmarth was never coming back, because he was dead. Murdered."

"Was this the police conclusion, Miss Alexander?"

"The police came to no conclusion at all."

"They still regard Caxton as a missing person, then?"

"And will continue to, as I understand it, until seven years have elapsed, at which time he can be declared legally dead."

"But you think he's been dead right along?"

"I've been more sure of it with each passing year until . . ." her blue eyes closed momentarily, "until a week ago."

"What happened a week ago?"

"I received a letter from him in the mail. Ostensibly from him, I should say."

"Ostensibly? Do you mean it's forged?"

"No. It's in Will's handwriting, but . . ." She rose from the window seat and went with willowy grace across the room to the desk. "Let me show it to you, Mr. Pilgrim. Then we can discuss it more intelligently."

The envelope she handed me was an off-white of good rag content. It bore the typed name and address of Miss Maura Alexander but not the sender's. It had been postmarked in Norwalk, Connecticut, eight days earlier. Inside, on a single sheet of folded paper that matched the envelope, were several paragraphs written in the kind of mystifying hand that physicians affix to prescription blanks. Deciphering it was not easy.

My dearest Maura—

Due to circumstances beyond my control, this communication is perforcedly brief but its plea is nonetheless urgent. Believe this, and believe it well, if you cherish the hope of our future together.

Here is what you must do without question: Proceed at once to your safe-deposit box. Remove therefrom all the jewels left you by your dear departed mother. Cache them with loving care in an empty bonbon box. Wrap this box

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and seal it as if for first-class mailing. Then go home and wait with the package ever at your side or in your lap.

Soon you will receive telephonic instructions on what to do from him who now holds my life, as well as yours, in the palm of his hand. I beseech you, my beloved, to act unerringly upon his advice in order that I may return safely to the warmth of your embrace.

Wilmarth

When I'd finally puzzled through this patently flamboyant prose, I looked over at Miss Alexander who was again sitting on the edge of the window seat. "He has an odd way of expressing himself," I said.

"The phraseology is not Will's, I assure you."

"Not even *my beloved*?"

"Absolutely not. That sort of romantic sentiment was not his way."

Glancing again at the letter, I said: "*The warmth of your embrace*?"

"Not in character."

"*Your dear departed mother*?"

"Neither is that."

"*An empty bonbon box*?"

"Will certainly knew a bonbon from a gumdrop, but he would have said chocolates or candy."

"You think, then, that this letter was dictated to him?"

"Of course it was. *Telephonic instructions.* He would not have used such a stilted phrase. After all, he possessed an incisive scientific mind. He was not maudlin, ever. And he never signed himself *Wilmarth* in anything addressed to me. It was always Will—or simply the initial."

"Have you let the police in on this latest development?"

"No. You are my police force for the time being."

"I may have to beg a little official help."

"I'm leaving everything to your own best judgment. Myself, I'm at a complete loss."

Tea and, of all things, hot buttered scones, appeared at this moment on a tray borne upon Aggie's right shoulder and uplifted palm.

I got up and went to the window while Miss Alexander and Aggie were arranging china and silver on the lacquered table. Holding the letter up to the sun, I discerned the watermark—crossed quills with *Herndon Bros R-32* overriding. I also detected for the first time a faded brown smudge about the size of a thumbprint in the lower left corner of the paper.

"Do you take lemon or cream, Mr. Pilgrim?"

Miss Alexander and I were alone again. "Lemon's fine." I

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strolled to the table. "Fill me in a bit, ma'am, on Dr. Caxton and you. For instance, how did you happen to meet?"

"We met at a dinner party given by Dr. Newsome and his wife. We were the only guests present who were not married, so it was a matchmaking occasion, pure and simple. I knew it then, but I didn't care. Will and I got along splendidly right from the start."

"Dr. Newsome was a mutual friend?"

"Yes. I'd known him for ages, and Will and he attended Yale together. Now that I think of it, Harry Newsome was the first person to realize that something was amiss the day Will vanished."

"Tell me about that."

"They had an appointment at the bar of the Flagship Hotel to go over some medical problem. They often met there—perhaps once or twice a week—to get away from the routine of interruption. On this particular afternoon, Will left his office at four-fifteen, according to Wilma Klocker, in order to meet Dr. Newsome at four-thirty, as prearranged."

"Who's Wilma Klocker?"

"At that time she was Dr. Caxton's receptionist and bookkeeper."

I nodded. "I see. Please go on."

"As I recall the facts, such as they are, Harry Newsome arrived at the Flagship a few minutes ahead of schedule. Both men were professionally punctual, and knew it of each other, and so Harry ordered a martini for himself and a Rob Roy for Will. Ten minutes later, when Will still had not appeared, Harry got on the phone to Miss Klocker. Miss Klocker was amazed that Will was not already at the hotel. She suggested that Dr. Newsome phone me. You see, Will and I were supposed to have dinner together that evening at the Shawnee Country Club."

"It's coming back to me now," I said. "From the newspaper accounts. He never kept his date with Newsome and he never kept his date with you."

Miss Alexander did not risk a word. She simply nodded.

"There was something about his car," I went on. "Am I right in assuming that he normally would have driven his car from the office to the Flagship?"

"You are. It's a distance of perhaps five miles through city traffic. The car was discovered in a cow pasture four days later by a farmer—it was sort of hidden in a thicket of bushes."

"Here in Connecticut, wasn't it?"

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"Yes. Down in Queensport."

"Is Queensport relevant in any way?"

"Will owned a lodge down there—a hideaway, he liked to call it—and forty or so acres of land. One day we dreamed of building a house there designed just for us. We had the plans nearly finished when—"

"I seem to remember that there was some evidence that Caxton, or another person who had a key, used that lodge after the disappearance."

A shudder went through Miss Alexander's body. "I prefer not to think of that at all," she said.

Then, belatedly, I remembered that the evidence was blood, and quite a lot of it. Beyond that, the details were foggy. I changed tack. "Does Dr. Caxton have any relatives?"

"Nobody close. A stepsister who lives in Darien."

"A stepsister?"

"Will's mother died when he was ten or twelve. His father remarried a few years later. A widow. Not a successful venture, from the little I knew of it. Will kept that part of his life buried. Anyway, his father died while Will was at college and apparently that severed the connection for good."

"You don't happen to recall the stepsister's name, now, do you?"

"Doan, I believe. No, Dean. That's it—Phyllis Dean."

"Getting back to this letter," I said. "What did you do when you received it?"

"After reading it, I phoned Fred Wayne."

"Yes?"

"He advised me to comply with the instructions just in case Will might still be alive."

"So you took the jewels from the safe-deposit box and came home and began to wait?"

"And I've been waiting ever since."

"No call?"

"No call."

"If it's a hoax it's a strange one."

"Cruel—and senseless. Why these jewels instead of money? Their value is largely sentimental."

"I see. What would be the approximate market value?"

"Well, there's a diamond dinner ring in an old-fashioned setting that might bring ten thousand dollars. But everything else is sort of gimcrack. Baubles, really. Silver arm bracelets that were popular thirty years ago; a choker necklace of cultured pearls; cameo brooches. Trinkets like that."

"Did Dr. Caxton ever show an interest in these things?"

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"Yes, I guess he did, once."

"An inordinate interest?"

"I suppose so."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't know how I happened to mention the things, but I do recall that Will displayed what might be termed an inordinate interest. A few days later I humored his wish, as it were, by taking the things from the safe-deposit box and bringing them home. Will examined each piece from all angles. It seemed to make him sad, somehow."

"Sad?"

"Yes." Her eyes softened with remembrance. "I almost expected him to weep. Absurd. He didn't, of course. But he did something equally unexpected. He arranged all those gaudy items on a red velvet cloth and took several pictures of them with my camera."

I let that lay because I didn't know what to say.

"Moreover," Miss Alexander continued, "that was the night he asked me to marry him."

Clearing my throat with a gulp of tea, I said, "How do you wish me to act in this matter, ma'am?"

"I want you to find out whether Will Caxton is alive or dead."

"Fine. Do you have a photograph of him?"

"A snapshot only. Taken with that same camera." Going to the glass dressing table, she opened a purse that lay there. "It's not a very good one, I'm afraid. I took it myself."

The picture, in color, showed a slender man in blue swim trunks sitting on the gunwale of a Boston Whaler, his bare feet in the water. The refractive glare of the sun had pretty much washed away any distinctive facial features. All that came through was the sandy color of his hair parted carelessly on the right.

"This is it?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so. He was shy about being photographed."

"Then it'll have to do. Also, I'll keep the letter if you don't mind."

"I never want to see that letter again."

"One more thing, Miss Alexander. If you should receive those so-called telephonic instructions, get in touch with me at once."

I found my own way down the stairs and out of that beautiful and lonely house. As I slid behind the wheel of my car, the time by my watch was 3:29. I drove to police headquarters.

Capt. Thomas McFate handles homicide investigations in this city. Meeting me at the door of his cluttered office, he said, "I thought you were on vacation, Jake."

"I've been back a week. Now

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I've got to pay the piper, Tom."

"And you've got a crazy client."

"She's quite sane. The crazy thing is what's happening to her."

"Sit down and tell me how we may further your private enterprise. I'm going to be late for dinner anyhow."

As I related generally some of what Maura Alexander had told me earlier, McFate began to nod his gray box of a head in a weary confirmation. Of course he'd heard versions of it all years ago, but when I came to the part about the letter, an expression of faint interest squeezed new crags into his face.

"Why didn't the lady present this fresh evidence to a public servant like me?" he asked.

"She's a very private lady, Tom."

"And very rich, too. Let's see this letter."

I handed it over. He read it slowly, then he turned it lengthwise and backside-to and upside down, studying each aspect with a sullen care.

"What do you think of it?" I asked.

"Good paper," he said, holding it up to the late-afternoon sunlight filtering through the dirty office window. "Quality. They hardly ever make it like this anymore."

"That's what I've been thinking."

"Herndon Brothers," he said, reading the watermark.

"The name's familiar but I can't nail it down."

"Printing-supply house in Bridgeport. They've been in business since George Washington slept at the brassworks."

"See that faded brown spot?"

"Sure," he said.

"Is it blood?"

"We'll ask the lab."

"You're keeping the letter as evidence?"

"You bet your sweet tooth."

"Then do me a favor—a couple of 'em, Tom."

"Fire away."

"Let me have a squint at the record."

"That's easy." McFate went to a metal filing cabinet, pulled out a squeaky drawer, riffled through tabbed folders, and finally selected a thin one. "We never had a helluva lot on it, Jake. Most of it was out of town, the hard facts. Queensport and points south. The state police covered those angles. Lt. Petrie was the man at the helm."

"Jim Petrie—yeah, I know him."

"Now, what's this other favor?"

"Check with Herndon Brothers about the paper."

McFate shook his head. "I was

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going to do that anyway, Jake."

While I went through the lean file with the proverbial fine-tooth comb, McFate busied himself on the telephone. The only information I unearthed, which was new to me and perhaps of some importance, was that Wilmarth Caxton's blood type belonged to Group O, and Group O, I seemed to remember, covered about forty-three percent of the Caucasian population.

"Who's the top man there now?" McFate was asking his phone. Then: "Just mention my name, and he'll talk to me." Then: "Yes, Mr. Trowbridge. Same to you. Yes, I knew old Harold Herndon back a few years ago. Long as that, is it? Time flies." Then he got down to business.

Within five minutes he learned a lot. *Herndon Bros R-32,* with crossed quills, had been milled for the firm by the Rex Paper Company of Groveton, New Hampshire. The last order was delivered twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five years ago? Right. Shortly thereafter Rex Paper pulled up stakes and moved to South Carolina. Herndon had sold the paper in limited quantities to a dozen or so quality printers throughout Connecticut who used it for color brochures and personalized stationery. Not one of these was still in business today. The largest consumer of that particular formulation had been a Fairfield printer named Carl Loomer. He had produced deluxe editions of English classics for a society of book collectors, but both the man and the society had been dead and buried a quarter of a century.

"Well, one thing's for damn sure," McFate said after cradling the phone, "nobody bought this stationery in the five-and-dime last week."

"I don't think the letter was written last week either," I said.

"Neither do I. It probably was written shortly after Caxton dropped out of sight."

"I wonder why it wasn't mailed until five years later."

"I'm asking myself the same question, Jake. And there's only one answer."

"The sender has been out of circulation."

"That's the answer."

Back at my apartment, I poured a hooker of vodka and phoned the state cops. The switchboard informed me that Lt. Petrie was off duty. An hour later I reached him at his home.

"The Caxton case," he said to my question, "was the damnedest dead end I've ever run across."

I told him about the latest development.

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"I still think the doc is defunct, Jake."

"What makes you so sure, Jim?"

"The lodge down in Queensport. It was a bloody mess."

"Give me some details."

"Details galore. Somebody, for instance, had tied somebody else to a cot and gone to work on him with surgical instruments. There was blood on the rope, blood on the cot itself, blood on the floor, blood on the hearthstone. How's that for details?"

"Caxton's blood?"

"His type O, the most common type. My type too."

"Were the surgical instruments Caxton's?"

"No. He wasn't a surgeon anyway. A neurologist, they called him, and apparently a damn good one. A funny thing about the surgical instruments. We found them in the fireplace under a pile of ash. Somebody'd tossed them on top of a blazing fire, apparently, but stainless steel doesn't burn. There were no fingerprints though."

"What about neighbors? They notice anything?"

"This lodge isn't exactly on the corner of Main and East Kidney, Jake. It's way the hell and gone in the woods, the middle of nowhere. Acres and acres of fat trees and bushes, with just a skinny little dirt road leading in. You could stage a Holy Roller barbecue there and hardly disturb the birds."

"What about the hayshaker who found Caxton's car?"

"Honest stock with a wad of plug in his mouth. Swore the car was not in the pasture the day before he found it."

"Which means it was somewhere else, since it disappeared three days earlier."

"That's a reasonable assumption."

"Where?"

"At the lodge maybe. We found tire tracks there that matched the tires on the car. But Caxton visited the place nearly every weekend."

"I suppose you questioned the stepsister, Jim."

"That Dean woman? Sure. A dozen times. Well, anyhow, five or six times."

"She able to come up with anything?"

"Nothing at all. She was one hell of a jumpy broad. At first I figured she was hiding something, not telling us all she knew. Later it developed that her marriage was going on the rocks and she was hamstring uptight."

"Well, thanks, Jim. Every little bit helps."

"You're welcome, and good

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luck. I'll visit McFate in the morning and take a gander at that letter."

In the morning I drove over to the Boulevard Medical Building, a sandstone edifice inhabited by physicians and surgeons, psychiatrists and pediatricians, podiatrists and orthodontists. The directory in the creamy-brown marble lobby placed Harry S. Newsome, M.D., in Suite 315. One of the two elevators was open and waiting. I slid aboard and rode it alone to the third floor. Directly across from the elevator, a black pebbled-glass door bore the two-line message in white letters:

Doctor Newsome
Enter Here

I obeyed. The reception room was spacious and very brightly decorated. Easy chairs and comfortable settees, upholstered in peppermint stripes, were in sufficient number to accommodate a dozen or so moribund customers, but they were all unoccupied at this time of the morning. The merry motif was continued on the immaculate white walls which were hung at disparate intervals and levels with gay prints: a Parisian street cafe under a filigree of awnings and sunlight, a glistening blue sky adrift with a hundred bright balloons, a sandy beach the color of saffron sprinkled with vermilion umbrellas and inert people in varicolored bathing wear. Anything and everything to take ailing man's mind off the collapsing organs inside.

A stout woman with tangerine-colored hair sat behind a gleaming black desk shaped like an obtuse triangle. Through horn-rimmed glasses she regarded me with an expression of benevolent inquiry.

"I'd like to see Dr. Newsome," I said.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm afraid not."

Taking the pen from an onyx desk set, she poised it over a note pad. "Tell me what's bothering you and I'll see if we can work you in."

I grinned. "It's not a medical problem."

"What is it, then?"

"My name is Pilgrim," I said. "I'm a private investigator working for a friend of Dr. Newsome's. I believe he can give me some personal information that may be helpful."

"I see. Well, the doctor is not in yet." She glanced at her wristwatch. "He'll be here at ten o'clock if you'd care to wait."

"I'll wait." I got a copy of *National Geographic* from a table littered largely with fashion magazines and settled among the

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peppermint stripes of a settee, prepared to be patient for twenty minutes more or less.

The receptionist still wanted to write something on her pad. "May I have the name of the friend you mentioned?"

"Miss Maura Alexander."

Her pinkish eyebrows arched in surprised recognition. "Miss Alexander? Why, of course."

"You know her?"

"Very well indeed. Some years back I used to work for her fiancé—another doctor."

"Wilmarth Caxton."

This time the eyebrows leaped above the topmost rim of her glasses. "Are you investigating that terrible tragedy?"

"I am, Miss Klocker. That's your name, isn't it?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"You're on my list of people to interview."

"Poor dear Miss Alexander. Does she still cling to the hope that Dr. Caxton may be alive?"

"She thinks he's dead."

"Then why—"

"Will you permit me to ask a few questions first, Miss Klocker?"

"If it will help, certainly."

"How long were you employed by Dr. Caxton?"

"Six years plus a few months."

"Did he have any enemies that you know of?"

"None at all," she declared. "Disabused patients maybe? Crackpots? As a neurologist, he must have had his share of weirdos."

"Well, yes, of course he did. But most of his patients were women. Hardly physically or mentally equipped to do what seems to have been done to Dr. Caxton. We had some men, too. All of them that I remember were so tied up in personal knots that they could hardly plan what to have for breakfast."

"Keep remembering, Miss Klocker. Did anyone ever threaten him? Even in jest? Or refuse to pay a bill?"

"Nobody ever threatened him to my knowledge. Naturally we had our share of deadheads, and we simply wrote them off." Her eyes narrowed suddenly as if measuring an unexpected idea. "There were those peculiar letters he received occasionally."

"That's what I'm looking for. Something peculiar." Getting up, I tossed the magazine back on the table.

Miss Klocker returned the pen to its holder. "There were three or four of them as I recall. I opened them myself along with the regular mail."

"All from the same writer?"

"Yes."

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"What made them, as you say, peculiar?"

"They said nothing that made any real sense. Motherhood was the theme that kept recurring—like a fixation. The writer appeared to believe that his own mother had let him down and he implied that Dr. Caxton was somehow to blame."

"You're using the masculine gender, Miss Klocker. Why? Was the handwriting obviously a man's?"

"As a matter of fact, the letters were typed."

"The signature then?"

"Just initials, also typed."

"Do you remember the initials?"

"R. L."

"Then the writer may have been either a woman or a man."

"I felt intuitively that the tone was always masculine."

"Did any particular sentence or phrase stick in mind?"

"Why, yes. There was one sentence that each letter ended with. Crazy. Something to do with ancestors. Let's see now. No, not ancestors. Antecedents. That's the word. *The remedy for my antecedents lurks tirelessly in the future.* And that's the sentence."

This sounded like the same melodramatic stylist who had honed out *telephonic instructions,* et cetera. "Did these letters arrive shortly before Dr. Caxton's disappearance?"

"Oh, no. They were spread over a couple of years."

"How did Caxton react to them?"

"The only time he read one of these letters in my presence—and that was the first one—he simply shook his head wearily, then tore the envelope and all into shreds and dropped them into a wastebasket."

"You didn't happen to notice the postmark, did you?"

"I did. They were all mailed from Riverhead, Long Island."

"You're a marvel, Miss Klocker."

She smiled. "That was easy, Mr. Pilgrim. I've often thought that the initials R. L. might have stood for Riverhead, Long Island. Kooky, sure, but it's the sort of ploy that might occur to a crackpot."

"Come to think of it, yeah."

"I never mentioned these letters to the police back during the investigation," she continued, fretting a little. "They were so trivial—pitiful, actually—against what had happened to Dr. Caxton that I don't believe I even thought about them. Was I remiss?"

"We're all remiss at least twice a day," I said.

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A moment later a man of slight build with an excellent tan, a neat white moustache and a beautifully cut blue flannel suit, opened the office door and peered inquisitively at me and then at Miss Klocker. "Good morning," he said cheerfully as he moved toward the inner sanctum.

"Dr. Newsome," Miss Klocker said, "this is Mr. Pilgrim, a private detective. He's working for Miss Alexander and wishes to talk with you for a few minutes."

"How much time do we have?"

"Miss Goggins is not scheduled for another fifteen minutes, and she's usually late."

Newsome gave me a friendly grin. "We'll make Miss Goggins pay for that. Come on along, Mr. Pilgrim. I've never talked with a private eye before."

His own office was comparatively somber compared to the reception room. Motioning me to a brown metal chair with a tufted white seat cushion, he lit a cigarette and parked himself on the angular edge of his desk. "What's Maura got you doing?" he asked.

I brought him pretty much up to date.

He walked around the desk and settled thoughtfully in the swivel chair. "Maybe I should tell you something I hardly admit to myself," he said, as if thinking aloud.

"I need all the dope I can get, Doctor."

"It's always been my secret opinion that Will Caxton is very much alive."

"You stand alone, then."

"I realize that."

"What do you base your opinion on?"

"To begin with, Mr. Pilgrim, a few weeks after Will disappeared, the probate court appointed me administrator of his estate. So it was my task to gather together the assets and liabilities and, in general, to maintain certain financial order until Will either returned or was declared legally dead. Well, I learned from financial memoranda in his safe-deposit box that he was keeping seven thousand dollars' worth of United States savings bonds in his office safe. A month or so after he'd vanished, I finally got around to checking this safe. It contained not a single bond."

"Theft?"

"So I thought at first. I figured that some burglar with sanded-down fingertips had read the news stories about Will's disappearance and had tried his luck in the empty office. I reported as much to the probate court."

"Was there any evidence of forced entry to the office?"

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"None. And the safe was intact too. Anyhow, since I had the serial numbers of the missing bonds, I played a hunch of my own. I asked a good personal friend of mine in the Treasury Department to check privately on these bonds to see if they had been converted—and when—and by whom."

"And the hunch paid off?"

"A few months later. Three thousand dollars of these bonds had been cashed through a bank in Paterson, New Jersey, four days after Will's disappearance. The remainder were cashed two weeks later through a bank in Tampa, Florida."

"All by Caxton?"

"Unquestionably. I was permitted to examine photostats of the signatures. They were not forgeries."

"Who else knows about this little item?"

"Nobody but me, and my Treasury friend. And now you."

"Why have you kept it buried?"

"Let's say out of a deep personal respect for Will Caxton. Whatever he's been up to, he must have a damned good reason for doing it."

"Has he tapped any other sources? Checking account? Savings?"

"No. Just those bonds."

"Do we draw the same conclusion from that?"

"Perhaps. What's yours, Mr. Pilgrim?"

I didn't have to mull it over. "Savings bonds can be converted anywhere with minimal identification. A driver's license will do. But nowadays a personal check is nearly impossible to cash in a bank other than your own. Most tellers are required to make a phone call to the bank on which the check is drawn for a report on the cash balance in the account and, incidentally, a description of the check's signatory. Similar difficulties exist when withdrawing savings. The depositor must appear in person with a passbook. Which leads me to conclude that Dr. Caxton did not wish to be seen by anyone who knew him even slightly."

"I agree," Newsome said, extinguishing his cigarette in a tray.

"This leads to another question. Did Caxton remove the bonds from the safe before he vanished or afterward?"

"That one I can answer, thanks to Miss Klocker. The morning after Will went away, she opened the safe to place inside a packet of pill samples that had arrived in the mail from a drug company, and she distinctly remembers seeing the sheaf of bonds."

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"Then Miss Klocker also knows about the bonds?"

"Only that they are missing. Not that they were later cashed by Will himself."

Miss Klocker chose this moment to open the door and announce that Miss Goggins was waiting.

From the phone in the lobby I reached my answering service. Among the several messages the one which interested me most was a request from Capt. McFate to contact him ASAP. I did so.

He came on, overriding the voice of the young detective who sat outside his door. "McFate here. Okay, Gene, you can hang up now. Captain McFate speaking."

"Morning, Tom, this is Jake. Just got your message."

"Oh, yes. That screwy letter you brought in yesterday."

"Go on."

"It was blood, all right."

"Caxton's?"

"No. Different group altogether. The lab says it's—let's see, this damn print gets smaller every year—it falls under Group AB."

"That's rare, isn't it, Tom?"

"Bet your sweet tooth it's rare. Flows in approximately three percent of the population."

"Narrows it down, doesn't it?"

"Depends on how you look at it. In this country it narrows it down to a little more than six million people."

"We can reduce the geographic limits a bit," I said.

"That's good."

"Start with Connecticut and New York, Tom."

"*All* of New York?"

"Begin with Long Island in the Riverhead area."

"You must know something I don't know, Jake. You better spill it."

"I don't know enough yet to justify my expenses. What I'm giving you is a sort of harebrained guess. But you might strike pay dirt by checking the AB Group with the blood banks in this area."

"You suggesting we call all hospitals in Connecticut and New York?"

"Maybe. Another angle comes to mind. Possibly the hospital associations have a list of where and from whom they can obtain AB plasma in a hurry. Tiptoe through the yellow pages."

"All right, wisenheimer. Let's say I compile a list of all the AB donors and donees within a few thousand square miles. Then what?"

"We're probably looking for a guy with the initials R. L."

"I'm ordering you a tailor-made straitjacket, Jake. Drop by any time."

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On that note we cut the connection.

Next I dialed Maura Alexander's number. Aggie answered. She fetched her employer.

I tested her with the R. L. initials. Nothing came to mind. "Now, about your mother's jewels," I continued. "Did Dr. Caxton ever give you any reason for taking a snapshot of them?"

"Not really. I got the feeling, however, they reminded him of something in the past."

"*His* mother's jewelry, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. It's curious that you should mention his mother. Once I asked him if he had a photograph of her and it turned him quite morose. Later he told me that he hadn't even a single snapshot of her. He could barely remember what she looked like. So it's entirely possible that those old trinkets stirred some forgotten memory."

"Thank you, Miss Alexander. I think I'd better pay a visit on Dr. Caxton's stepsister."

The sun was sailing in the middle of a cloudless blue sky; its rays splashed brightly off the hood of the car. I donned dark glasses and turned on the radio, getting the tail end of a weather forecast—warm and clear again tomorrow with a fifty-fifty chance of showers in the early evening.

I reached Darien before lunch. Stopping at the Red Coach Grill, I looked up Phyllis Dean in the telephone directory. She was still listed just that way, which indicated that her marriage was finished for good. The address was 43 East Walk Drive. The waitress, who took my order for a vodka martini and a sliced chicken sandwich toasted, told me how to get there.

The Dean residence was one of a dozen that differed from each other only in the color of its paint. It was a yellowish green with white trim. A ten-year-old boy with a mop of flaxen hair was sitting idly on the red-brick steps that led to the front door. He watched me approach from interested eyes that almost matched the color of the house.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, brushing the hair away from his blond eyebrows.

"Is your mother home?"

"Yes, but she's not feeling well. She's lying down upstairs."

"That's too bad," I said. "Do you think she'd see me for a few minutes?"

"Not if you're selling something," he said flatly.

"Believe me, I'm no salesman. I'm a private detective, like you

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see on television most any hour."

"No kidding." He got to his feet and held out his hand. "I'm Gussie Dean. Glad to meet you."

"The name's Pilgrim, Gussie. What's Gussie stand for?"

"August."

"After your father?"

"I was born in August." He opened the door. "Come on in."

We entered a small neat hallway with a staircase rising up from it. Gussie mounted it, taking the stairs two at a time and calling out, "Mom, Mom, a private detective to see you."

I strolled to the left, entering a livingroom that ran the length of the house. It was meagerly furnished. The green wall-to-wall carpet was balding in spots. On either side of a small fireplace was a bookcase. I drifted toward one of them for a browse.

Immediately my eyes were attracted to a series of rich red volumes with embossed gold titles: *Robinson Crusoe, Tristram Shandy, The Vicar of Wakefield, Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World by Lemuel Gulliver* . . . On the base of the spine they all bore the imprint of *The Classics Collectors.*

I took down Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.,* an old favorite of mine, and opened it to the end papers. A colophon informed me that the book had been printed from Bodoni Roman typeface on a special rag stock manufactured by the Rex Paper Company. The printer was the Loomer Press of Fairfield, Connecticut.

I checked several other volumes. They contained identical colophons. As I riffled through the pages of *Green Mansions,* I was reaching the conclusion that Phyllis Dean's possession of these books was a matter of deep significance. Then, as if to confirm my suspicion, a scribbled passage leaped out at me from the margin of the page whereon the death of Rima was described:

O dearest beloved, there is naught but unbearable torment left in this world without you. I cannot conceive a life sans the warmth of your embrace. Farewell. Bobo.

The style was unmistakable. Bobo, whoever he was, invariably pondered in terms of *my beloved* and *the warmth of your embrace.* He'd used the selfsame phrases when he dictated the ransom note to Caxton. Most important at the moment, here was proof that Caxton's kidnapper had once had access to these books and consequently must be known to Mrs. Dean.

I heard Gussie pounding impet-

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uously down the stairs and behind him, slippered and ladylike, a softer set of footfalls.

"Here she is," Gussie said, charging into the room.

A moment later Phyllis Dean appeared in the archway. She was wearing a pink turtleneck jersey, black velveteen slacks and a pair of white sandals. Even if Gussie hadn't advertised it, anyone would have sized her up right away as a woman not enjoying the best of health. She was thin as a broomstick—I'd guess ten pounds underweight—and her drawn face was the color of bread dough gone flat. Her brown eyes were large and full of fear.

"My son says you're a private detective," she said. "Is that true?"

"That's right, Mrs. Dean. Pilgrim's the name." I was holding *Green Mansions* conspicuously in my right hand, but it didn't appear to register with her.

"I can't imagine what a detective would want with me," she said.

With a glance at the boy I said, "Perhaps you'd like to hear about it alone."

"Not at all," she said, placing a comradely arm on the boy's shoulder.

"You call it, then. I'm representing Miss Maura Alexander."

A flicker of recognition crossed the fear in her eyes.

"You seem to know the name," I said.

"We've never met, but I know the name."

"It's about the case involving your stepbrother."

Relinquishing the boy's shoulder, Mrs. Dean subsided in a nearby chair. "That's water over the dam. I'm sincerely sorry for Miss Alexander, but that's all dead and buried."

"It's being dug up again," I said.

She raised her haunted eyes questioningly.

"Eight days ago," I continued, "Miss Alexander received in the mail a letter in Wilmarth Caxton's handwriting which said in effect that he was being held for ransom."

Mrs. Dean lifted a frail hand to her eyes, as if trying to hide them. "Oh, no," she said. "Oh, no."

"What's the matter, Mom?" Gussie asked.

"You'd better go outside and play, dear."

"Do I have to?"

"Please."

When the outside door closed after the reluctant boy, I resumed. "Now, ma'am, there are a lot of strange things about this entire affair, but among the strangest is

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the kind of ransom being asked—and *five* years after the presumed kidnapping."

She hung on my words in abject fascination.

"The kidnapper, whoever he is, seems to want a few handfuls of old jewelry, none of it worth very much, all of it purely keepsake from Miss Alexander's mother."

"Oh, not again," Mrs. Dean said in a thin, shuddering voice.

"What do you mean *not again*?"

"I don't know what I mean."

"I think you do. I think you know more about this business than anyone I've met yet."

"I can't talk about it." She now covered both eyes and bowed her head like a lady waiting for the ax. "I'm pledged not to."

"By whom?" I said. Then, conscious of the book still in my hand, "By Bobo?"

She shook her hanging head. "Of course not."

"Who is this Bobo?" I asked sharply.

The question had its effect. She dropped the hands from her eyes and looked up at me from stunned, tear-filled eyes. "How—how did you know about Bobo? How?"

I opened *Green Mansions* to the telltale page.

Gradually she absorbed it. "He leaves a lasting trace of himself everywhere," she said. "Even in Daddy's books."

"Who is Bobo?"

Her response was to tug the high collar of the jersey away from the pale stalk of her neck. A russet welt ran like a worm from below the left ear nearly to the windpipe. It was an old wound that must have required a dozen stitches.

"That's Bobo at work," she said resignedly. "Another trace. I was fifteen when he did it. That's when Will finally got Mother to sign the commitment papers."

"Who is Bobo?" I repeated wearily.

"My real brother. My crazy brother." Her voice was weary too. "Robert Loomer. Bobo for short."

I knew one thing now; R. L. didn't stand for Riverhead, Long Island. "Then Carl Loomer, the man who printed all these books, was your father?"

She nodded. "It seems he's been dead forever—and Mother, too."

I sat down and began to probe.

In the next twenty minutes I learned that Bobo Loomer, three years older than his sister Phyllis, had exhibited traits of emotional instability since childhood. When his wishes were thwarted just a little bit, he screamed himself blue

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in the face. If the cat crossed his path at the wrong angle, he kicked it viciously in the belly. Whenever either of his parents failed to pay him attention upon demand, he would practically throw a fit. He bit other children on the slightest provocation.

When Mrs. Loomer married Wilmarth Caxton's father after her first husband's death, Bobo became a veritable demon. He defied all authority. He kept everyone in the family in a state of constant misery. Of course he was insanely jealous of Will, who was his senior by four years.

A typical example of Bobo's devilishness was the destruction of mementos treasured by Will—a photograph and a few snapshots of his dead mother, and a small plush-lined case containing several pieces of jewelry. Bobo disposed of these items by concealing them in a garbage can just prior to the weekly pickup. He laughed about it for days. Will wept for an hour. It was the first and only time Phyllis Dean remembered him with tears in his eyes.

"So Bobo was finally put away?" I said.

"Yes. When he was nineteen. Mr. Caxton was dead by then. Will was at college, but he came home and helped Mother with the details."

"Was it a private sanitarium?"

"Yes. Out on Long Island."

"That figures."

"What do you mean?"

"Skip it, Mrs. Dean. Bobo must have gone over the wall five years ago. Right?"

She gave me a disoriented look.

"What did Bobo do after his escape?"

"I don't really know."

"Did he kidnap Caxton?"

"I think so. All I know is what Will told me on the phone. He didn't tell me much. He was in too much pain."

"This was five years ago?"

"Yes."

"Is Dr. Caxton still alive, ma'am? To the best of your knowledge?"

"He was a week ago. I pray to God he still is."

"You never told the police any of this at the time. Why not?"

"Will made me promise not to. He said he was badly hurt and needed time to get mended. Those were his words, *to get mended.*"

"Then it was Dr. Caxton who pledged you to secrecy?"

"Yes. He said he had arranged with Dr. Hoffmann to take Bobo back into custody without any publicity."

"Who is Dr. Hoffmann?"

"The chief psychiatrist at the sanitarium Bobo had escaped

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from. He's been so helpful to us."

"Where has Caxton been keeping himself these last five years?"

"I don't know that, either. He moved around a lot. Each time he arrived at a new place he always phoned and gave me a number where I could reach him in case I needed to."

"In case Bobo broke loose again?"

She nodded, in better control of herself now. "Will was afraid Bobo would hurt me again, or do something awful to Gussie."

"You say Will was alive a week ago, so you must have used a number he'd given you. Why?"

She squeezed one hand with another. "Bobo had escaped again. Dr. Hoffmann phoned to warn me. Then, that night, after I'd put Gussie to bed, he—Bobo came here and quietly demanded that I give him whatever money I had in the house. It was about nineteen dollars. Then he left, saying he had a lot of unfinished business to attend to."

"So instead of calling on the cops or possibly old Doc Hoffmann, you got in touch with Will."

"I tried to. But I didn't reach him until the following afternoon, when he reported for work."

"Where was he working?"

"In the maintenance department of a hospital in Alabama, under the name of Al Comstock. It was always a different name for each place."

"And what did he say when you told him about Bobo?"

"He said he would head north immediately. He told me not to say anything to anyone until I heard from him again." She shook her head sadly. "I've broken the promise."

"Maybe you broke it too late," I said, rising to leave.

Outside, Gussie was sitting disconsolately on the steps. I placed my hand lightly on his mop of hair and ruffled it. I gave him a quarter. For ice cream, I said. But even his slow smile had some pain in it.

My next port of call, as it turned out, should have been my first. Arriving a few minutes after four, I parked the wheels outside the Queensport Inn and went inside to mingle with the natives for the cocktail hour.

Some of these folk were beer-and-shot cats; some, very dry martinis; a few, wine on the sweet side. *Lumpenproletariat* with seaweed in its past. They told me, between sips and bites, what I wanted to know: how to get to Dr. Caxton's property. One thin wraith, toothless but gamely gumming beernuts, said he thought

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he'd seen activity there last night.

"Like what?" I asked.

"A light."

"A light?"

"Well, maybe not. I been drinking a little. Some sounds."

"Sounds?"

"Yeah. Now, maybe not. I had a few."

Gummer wasn't too far wrong, considering what happened.

I drove out there, of course, along Route 158 until I came to a fork in the road, the left leg with a white centerline, the right unmarked. I took the right.

Two miles along this road, exactly as predicted by a Queensport Inn habitué, I found a wide break in a toppling stone wall with a gnarled oak standing guard beside it. Under the oak a rutted dirt trail not much wider than a footpath disappeared within a tangle of birches and tamaracks. I nosed the car carefully between the gap until the rear end was off the public road. Then I got out and walked.

As I moseyed along I saw plain evidence underfoot that somebody had recently ridden a motorcycle along this trail at least twice—in and out. The tire marks crisscrossed in a number of places.

Caxton's lodge was about a quarter-mile in from the road. It was a rugged affair of unbarked logs constructed around a fieldstone chimney. Abe Lincoln in Connecticut. The bike tracks led right up to a woodpile that was leaning a little away from a couple of hand-hewn slabs of oak nailed together as a door. There was no bike in sight.

Quietly I placed my right hand on the japanned iron pull-handle of the door and depressed the thumb latch. The door swung inward with a squeaking complaint. The late-afternoon light passing over my shoulders fell fully on a man whose legs were bound by rope to the legs of the cobbler's bench he was sitting on. The upper part of his body was trussed firmly in a regulation straitjacket.

He blinked his eyes a few times as if unable to comprehend what he was seeing. Then he said, "Thank God that you've come in time."

"Who are you?" I asked, walking toward him.

"My name is Wilmarth Caxton," he said.

"Who tied you up, Doctor?"

"You seem to know me," he said in a guarded manner.

"Well, let's say I know *about* you. Through Miss Alexander." I was beginning to unfasten the straitjacket buckles. "Who tied you up, Doctor?"

"A man named Robert Loomer.

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Legally he's known as my stepbrother."

One of the three buckles was loose now. "Also known as Bobo."

He let out a short laugh. "Who told you that?"

"A woman named Dean. Allegedly your stepsister." The second buckle was loose.

"Dear beloved Phyllis," he said.

That's when I stopped unbuckling the straitjacket and began putting a few things together. I put the word *beloved* next to *legally* used in such odd conjunction with *stepbrother*. I added this language to *My name is Wilmarth Caxton*. Wilmarth. Not Will. Then my memory reproduced Caxton's image, caught so fuzzily in a snapshot that the only thing I could be certain about was the part in his hair—on the right side. This customer's hair was parted on the left.

I started to buckle him up again as the sound of a motorcycle drifted toward us from a distance.

"Quick!" the man in the straitjacket yelled. "Get me out of this before he arrives."

"Take it easy, Bobo," I said. "You're going to be all right."

But he wasn't. He started to shriek like a banshee as the sound of the bike grew louder. By the time the motorcycle came to an abrupt stop outside the door, Bobo was blue in the face and foaming at the mouth.

The man who appeared in the doorway was wearing faded blue denims, a red zipper jacket with *USA* stitched to the pockets, a huge pair of tinted goggles that masked most of his face, and a white helmet. He looked from the bucking Bobo to me and said, "Who are you, sir?"

I told him.

Standing there, looking like a thousand other easy riders and therefore perfectly disguised by conformity, he listened respectfully to what I told him. When I finished, all he said was, "I see."

Then he slid the goggles up on the helmet, exposing two livid scars that began beside either eyebrow and ran jaggedly along his cheeks to the corners of his mouth. Next he lifted the helmet from his head. Both ears were missing.

Five years ago, in this very cabin, Bobo had left another terrible trace of himself.

Noticing my stare, Caxton said, "I'm thankful that's as far as he got, Mr. Pilgrim. He had further surgery planned that would have utterly unmanned me."

A few hours later, just at dusk, a black limousine bulldozed its way along the trail to the cabin.

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It was piloted by a burly man in a chauffeur's uniform and co-piloted by another burly man in the proverbial white jacket, only this one was more of a light gray. They took Bobo back to the Long Island sanitarium where he would not live long enough to escape again. According to Dr. Hoffmann, with whom Caxton had been speaking from a pay phone in Queensport before returning to the cabin, Bobo was in the terminal stages of a liver disease.

That night, as we shared a few bottles of Burgundy that had been mellowing in the cabin for five years, Caxton told me what had happened. On the afternoon he was to have met Dr. Newsome at the Flagship Hotel, he got into his car in the parking lot and drove off. A couple of city blocks later, Bobo rose from the floor behind him and placed a scalpel at the base of his neck. Perforce he drove to the cabin in Queensport. Caxton did not like to dwell upon the details of what followed.

He wrote the ransom note at Bobo's dictation after the ear operation, which was performed with chloroform soaked in cotton as the anesthetic. Bobo had stolen the surgical tools and the chloroform from the sanitarium. He got the idea to ask for Maura Alexander's jewels as ransom after finding the picture of them in Caxton's wallet. They resembled in some respects, the jewels belonging to Caxton's mother that Bobo had given to the garbage collectors many years ago. After the ransom note had been written on a special type of paper which Bobo boasted could never be traced, the chloroform was again administered and the facial disfigurement operation was performed.

Fortunately, Bobo was a poor judge of the lasting effects of chloroform. Caxton regained consciousness while his captor was outside fetching wood for the fireplace. Each time Bobo went for another log, Caxton fought the cords that bound him to the cot which was serving as an operating table. He finally got free just as Bobo was crouched before the fire with a lighted match. Caxton picked up a scalpel. Bobo turned and saw him. They grappled together for a moment. The scalpel cut Bobo's finger, and the sight of his own blood horrified him. Whimpering, he surrendered. Stanching the blood flowing from his own wounds with wads of paper toweling, Caxton cleaned up the mess and tossed the surgical instruments into the fire. He had no clear plan in mind. That's why he forgot to retrieve the ransom letter, which came to the surface

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no less than five years later.

Late the following evening, leaving Bobo tied up on the cot, he drove to an outdoor phone booth and placed the confidential call to Dr. Hoffmann. Then another to Phyllis Dean.

The following night, with Bobo off his hands, Caxton drove to the Boulevard Medical Building. It was after one o'clock when he let himself, unseen, into his office. He took the bonds from his safe. He took bandages and penicillin. Then he drove back to Queensport and abandoned the car in a cow pasture. With his head and face bandaged, he walked to the expressway two miles north of town and got a ride almost immediately from a tractor-trailer driver whose only comment was, "Your friends play rough." He reached New York in time for an early breakfast.

"I didn't intend to stay away long," he said. "But each time I saw myself in a mirror I postponed the day of my return. Then when I read that the police thought I must be dead, I drifted along with that idea. It was wrong. I'm going to face it now—with some plastic surgery. I only hope Maura will forgive me."

"I'd bet my fee on that," I said.

When I phoned McFate the next morning, he began by saying, "You know, Jake, I took a whack at this nutty suggestion of yours about checking AB plasma banks in Long Island, and damn if it didn't pay off."

Laughing, I then told him all that he was going to tell me, and more.

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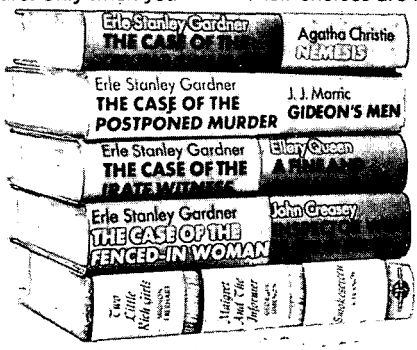

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